

# Social media can be an effective research tool but there are challenges

The third Annual Western Cape Research Ethics Committees Colloquium was hosted by the University of the Western Cape (UWC) on Tuesday 11 September 2018.



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Here, the effectiveness of social media as a research tool and the implications of work conducted on these social media platforms were highlighted.

According to Dr Amiena Peck, from UWC's Department of Linguistics, social media platforms have created many advantages for online research.

## Guidelines, privacy and cybersecurity

"Millions of South Africans use social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn, and more and more people join daily. This makes finding data more accessible, but it does offer challenges," Peck said.

"Unfortunately, there are no guidelines and no existing literature for guidelines when using social media for data collection, and there are several other challenges – such as privacy issues and cybersecurity."

Professor Neil Myburgh, chair of UWC's Biomedical Research Ethics Committee, said the issue of consent when using social media is often not spoken about – but this should change. “We have seen on Twitter where photos of children were shared in particular campaigns, bringing ethical issues to the surface,” he said.

Myburgh noted that researchers need to consider all ethical issues when harvesting data from social media and strict ethical guidelines need to be established for social media use.

### **Proper ethical research methods**

These kinds of reviews carried out by Research Ethics Committees allow a collective of multiskilled people to review a proposal and check its scientific veracity, as well as its ethical quality – a useful process.

UWC rector and vice-chancellor, Professor Tyrone Pretorius said ethics is close to the hearts of most researchers and professionals at universities.

“Colloquia such as these are important to ensure that proper ethical research methods are taught to our young researchers. We have seen what has been happening in the accounting profession, for example – the curriculum needs to be amended so that we can teach the softer skills to our young accountants,” he said.

The colloquium enabled fruitful engagement between people closely involved in ensuring both scientific and ethical quality in research, whilst contributing to better practices all around.

Attendees included participants from research structures at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, Stellenbosch University, University of Cape Town, the South African Medical Research Council and the Western Cape Department of Health.

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