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### Article

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### **Abstract**

This article explores the potential role of sustained social media use in longitudinal qualitative research. We introduce the research design and methodology of a research project exploring sustained use (five or more years) of the social network site Facebook among young people in their twenties. By focusing on this group, we seek to uncover how 'growing up' stories are told and archived online, and how disclosure practices (what people say and share on social media) change over time. We question how we can understand the 'digital trace' inscribed through the Facebook Timeline as a longitudinal narrative text. We argue that 'scrolling back' through Facebook with participants as 'co-analysts' of their own digital traces can add to the qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) tradition. QLR and the scroll back method attend to a similar set of concerns around change over time, the depth of inquiry, and uncovering rigorous, rich life narratives. We explore limitations (especially around intentionality) and ethical challenges, while also arguing for the inclusion of these often highly personal, deep, co-constructed digital texts in qualitative longitudinal research. We also consider how the scroll back method could apply to other digital media, as the sites and applications that people use diversifies and changes over time.

**Keywords:** digital traces; Facebook; longitudinal research; scroll back method; youth.

### **Introduction**

Young people's experiences of transition or 'growing up' are inscribed in various ways and in various places. Bedrooms, for instance, often serve as the first site upon which young people can actively 'mark out' an emerging identity project, crafted over time using material objects as well as media (Author 2). Young people use the realm of 'the private' as part of their everyday experiences and various media play a central role in their navigation of both the public and private spheres. Young people use media as a resource through which they constantly reconfigure public and private space, marking out their identities. Social media play a key role in those reconfigurations.

The ubiquity of digital social media in contemporary youth cultures has (re)ignited discussions around the significance of notions such as 'space' and 'the private'. Facebook, with more than a billion users globally (Facebook.com, 2015) has in many ways come to serve a similar function to the teenage bedroom, as a space where young people can exert both practical and symbolic forms of control (Hodkinson & Lincoln, 2008; Author 2 and 1) for example through the use of privacy settings (opening and closing the digital bedroom door) or the editing of an image before posting (Author 2). For young users who have grown up regularly using Facebook, significant parts of their social and cultural lives have been played out on the site. As spaces in which identity is enacted, edited, and made visible, social media like Facebook can capture growing up stories through a chronicle of mediated, transitional experiences.

Young people use various media as resources through which they constantly reconfigure public and private space, marking out their identities, and Facebook is just one example of this in a rich media landscape (Day Good, 2013). In recent years, a range of social media have emerged around Facebook: Instagram, Tumblr, Snapchat, WhatsApp, and so on. Facebook continues as the dominant form of social media (and buys competitors where possible), as adoption of other forms of social media have resulted in a diversification of platforms (Lenhart 2015) rather than a move from one to another, as was the case with MySpace (Author 1). While its longevity is not guaranteed, it seems to have developed a model of continuous invention and re-invention that works to regularly re-centre Facebook at the core of this wider social media landscape (Author 1 & 2; Wilken 2014).

Through sustained use (5+ years in our study), Facebook profiles - or 'Timelines', as they have come to be described in the most recent iteration - are constituted largely by everyday or mundane moments, punctuated by 'critical moments' (Thomson, Bell, Holland et al, 2002). These moments include moving out of home, dropping out of school, entering a relationship, learning to drive, a death in the family, going clubbing for the first time, and so on. In Giddens' terms, the 'fateful moment' (from which Thomson et al. borrow in conceptualising the critical moment), is 'highly consequential for a person's destiny' (1991: 121), and should be understood as distinct from but certainly affecting the inconsequential goings-on of daily life. When these critical moments are articulated and made visible on social media such as Facebook, and then subsequently archived by way of the persistent nature of these spaces (Marwick & boyd, 2014), they become key markers in a mediated

growing up story for young people. Further, and to use Mauthner's (2015) terminology, through the research process, everyday, mundane, and critical moments are brought forth as 'matterings', that is 'the past is apprehended from an evolving present' (Thomson & McLeod 2015: 246). As co-analysts, our participants shape the matter that comes to matter.

In this article, we set out our own qualitative research project centred on young people in their twenties who have been using Facebook for more than five years, in order to draw attention to the potential role of social media in longitudinal qualitative research. In doing so, we divide this article into three parts: first, we set out our framing of Facebook as an archive of life narratives (albeit with limitations); second, we introduce our own Facebook Timelines study, and the 'scroll back method' at the heart of our interviews, along with a discussion of ethics and limitations; and third, we bring the threads of the article together to advance our argument around the potential contribution of a 'scroll back method' to qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) and how the method may be used to study other social media.

### **Facebook as archive: Timelines, looking back, and memory-work**

For many, Facebook has come to represent an archive of memories that can be edited, re-organised, modified, re-configured, re-presented, and even deleted. The role of archivist is complicated and contested. For example, while the user may retain a personal level of control over content posted on their own Timelines, and the capacity to remove or curate content (wall posts, tagged images, comments) posted by Friends, Facebook itself - the 'third party' in Hogan's (2010) theorisation of the presentation of self on social media - also exercises a great deal of control. As Gehl (2014: 65) explains, 'social media have enabled new media companies and entrepreneurs to assume curatorial roles... [building] archives out of the products and traces of users' affective processing'. On Facebook, like other social media, one form of this institutional control is how (and when) certain disclosures are presented, and to some extent, to whom those disclosures are presented to through the algorithm that drives the News Feed.

Unlike the News Feed - the 'front' page made up of an amalgamation of content from their friends that users browse for recent posts and interactions from their network - the profiles

or Timelines of individual users can be controlled by users more directly. We will be focusing on the Timelines of individual users themselves, and not the amalgamated News Feed governed by an algorithm that can change the prominence and position of posts. We acknowledge that Facebook is not simply a neutral archive of memories and experiences, but is both subject to and working to produce regimes of power, surveillance, and ongoing reliance on corporately controlled infrastructure. Gehl's (2014: 69-70) consideration of the ways in which cloud-based archives (such as the Facebook Timeline) have been valorized over personally controlled archives (such as physical photo albums or even locally stored digital records) is a good example of this.

Since at least 2011, Facebook has introduced a series of features and design changes that emphasise and capitalise upon its archival nature and the sustained use of the site. In 2011, Facebook moved away from 'profiles' towards 'Timelines'. Timelines continue to operate as a kind of 'homepage' for users, where their various disclosures – images shared, status updates made, links posted, wall comments and so on – are collected. It also continues to be the page where users can record autobiographical detail about themselves: employment and education history, location, relationship status, and so on. The key change here is the way in which previous disclosures are (re)presented. Whereas in the original incarnation of the profile, users (and visitors to other users' profiles) would have to invest some time and effort into 'scrolling back' to old content (clicking 'older posts' over and over again), the Timeline iteration radically reorganised older posts by making them more immediately accessible. On the Timeline, disclosures from years gone by can be recalled by simply clicking on a year.

Since 2012, Facebook has been generating for its users annual 'year in review' summaries. Most recently, these have taken the form of a 'thread' of moments, as mediated on Facebook from the past year. Typically, these threads highlight important or 'critical' moments: birthdays, weddings, educational and professional achievements, and so on. Controversy arose in 2014, however, around the algorithm that determines which moments are highlighted in the year in review. Eric Meyer, whose daughter died in 2014, tried to avoid the year in review summary, but was nonetheless confronted with it in his feed by default: 'Yes, my year looked like that. True enough. My year looked like the now-absent face of my little girl. It was still unkind to remind me so forcefully' (Meyer, 2014). This is a distressing example, framed by Meyer as 'algorithmic cruelty', of the role algorithms play in selecting the experiences and 'moments' reflected back at us through features like the year in

review or look back videos. Facebook was quick to apologise to Meyer, admitting '[The app] was awesome for a lot of people, but clearly in this case we brought him grief rather than joy' (Gheller in Peterson, 2014).

In 2014, to mark its tenth year, Facebook invited users to generate personalised one minute 'look back' videos, featuring 'key moments' as mediated on the site. The videos were comprised of a selection of photographs and status updates drawn out of users' archives. Like the change from the profile to the Timeline, the look back videos draw attention to the role of Facebook as a site upon which life narratives are performed and organised, while also functioning as the site upon which these variously public and private disclosures are archived, recalled, and reflected upon (Author 1). According to Facebook, around 200 million of its billion or so users had these videos generated for them, and around half of those users then shared those videos back to their own networks (Spiridonov & Bandaru, 2014).

Taken together, changes like this (Timelines, lookback videos, 'on this day X years ago' functions) signal Facebook's recognition that the site has become an archive of life for its users. To leave Facebook would be to leave those traces – and the record of not only a personal, but a shared history – behind. These developments position the site not just as a place for the mediation of everyday life, but increasingly as a site for reflection, nostalgia, and looking back that, if treated ethically, could serve as an important text, or collection of texts, for social scientists interested in the life narratives of their participants.

### **The Facebook Timelines Project**

Despite discourses of decline and flight from Facebook (Miller, 2013; Cannarella & Spechler 2014), it still very much dominates the social web (Lenhart 2015; Author 1). While this may not be the case in five or ten years, at least in the short-term Facebook's dominance seems secure. Facebook's longevity sparked our interest in notions of sustained use of the site. In the Facebook Timelines project we interviewed 34 young people in their twenties from two areas: the northwest of England and Tasmania, Australia. We recruited twenty-somethings to explore how Facebook had been used to capture 'growing up' narratives and experiences, particularly throughout the teenage years and early twenties when a number of 'critical' and 'transitional' moments often occur (Thomson et al. 2002). In addition, Facebook is a key platform for this demographic to communicate with friends, family and peers as well as to network with groups, organisations and so on (Lenhart 2015). This

is the generation who were born into a period of ubiquity of digital media (Palfrey & Gasser, 2010) but also for whom Facebook was at one point seen as innovative and new; the 'grown up' sibling of other digital social media such as Bebo and MySpace that many had used previously (Author 1). For the majority of our participants, Facebook was incorporated into their lives from their early teens to become a key channel of communication. As we have come to see, this was a group of people who, to varying degrees, had documented their lives on Facebook.

As a now ubiquitous space of youth culture, we were also interested in Facebook because like many other social media as well as other youth spaces such as the teenage bedroom, its use straddles a number of complex boundaries particularly between the public and private domains. In this respect, while disclosures online and the subsequent narrative that is produced does 'feel' quite naturalistic inasmuch as the Timeline evolves over time through a series of often quite spontaneous thoughts (alongside those puzzled, stressed and pondered over). This is also quasi-publicly consumed information posted in a quasi-private space. As scholars such as Vitak (2012) and Sibona (2014) have pointed out, the collision of difference audiences in a single performative space has also produced an experience of 'context collapse' whereby the boundaries between public and private become blurred. For others such as boyd (2011) this online environment means that young people are navigating their way through a web of 'networked publics' and are constantly engaged in series of complex privacy negotiations. In this respect, privacy in the context of social network sites is also 'networked' according to Marwick and boyd (2014) and thus is precarious in the hands of other users where it can be contested, challenged and breached.

Against this backdrop we developed a series of research questions to explore in the Facebook Timelines project: 1) How does long-term (5+ years) use of Facebook manifest through the 'Timeline'?; 2) What is visible on these Timelines and what is invisible or left unsaid?; 3) How have disclosure practices (including friending/audience segregation strategies and other impression management processes) changed over time, both as our participants and Facebook itself have 'grow up'?; and 4) In terms of methodology, how might Timeline use and 'scrolling back' through the Timeline in an interview (as a prompt, and as a primary text of analysis) represent a new kind of research method for the social sciences? In this paper, we focus primarily on answering the fourth question, attending to other findings in forthcoming publications (Authors, forthcoming).

While Facebook Timelines could be read by social scientists as rich records of young people's unfolding lives, ripe for mining and analysis, these traces were not intended for research use and can often be highly personal and private. In this respect we had to carefully consider our methodological approach to incorporate the content of the Facebook Timeline alongside a discussion with the participant. Our thinking around consent and intentionality was guided here especially by Zimmer (2010) who stresses the significance of consent and intentionality. To fulfil our ethical obligations, we decided that Facebook Timelines should be interpreted alongside our participants. While we became Facebook 'friends' with the majority of our participants, our access to their profiles was for observation only, a point we expand on below. For this reason, we do not quote directly from our participants' profiles, only quoting directly from recorded interviews and 'scroll back' sessions, which we explain below. This decision was made to ensure that we limited the 'searchability' of our participants which would significantly increase if we quoted directly from their Facebook profiles.

#### The 'scroll back' method and the in-depth interview

'What distinguishes QLR is the deliberate way in which temporality is designed into the research process making change a central focus of analytical attention' (Thomson, Plumridge & Holland, 2003: 185). Temporality is a key focus in the Facebook Timelines project. As we have explained, the Facebook Timeline is an archive that is updated with each post, dated and stored by default. Only through effort are disclosures rendered ephemeral (Marwick & boyd 2014: 1060). We are working with a digital trace that is historical, through which we can 'look back' over key – as well as mundane – moments in our participants lives. Thomson et al. explain the centrality of time in QLR particularly in research with young people since 'time periods are distinguished by the contours of individual biographies, the life course and wider political and social change' (2003: 185). In this respect, we designed our study to capture not only an understanding of sustained use and narrative construction by young people in their twenties on the site, but also to illuminate the 'contours' of this narrative (especially critical or transitional moments) and how these were represented (or not) on Facebook.

In this respect, we adopted an approach that combined the more traditional in-depth qualitative interview with what we describe here as the 'scroll back' method. This combination 'brings to life' the digital trace, capturing the specific context(s) and contours within which



our participants are using Facebook to make disclosures that we could not intuit without them present. Further, this combination of methods enables us to understand our participants' uses of the site as part the process of continuous change (Thomson, Plumridge & Holland, 2003).

Using the pages and profiles that constitute digital social media as 'texts' for analysis or as prompts in interviews is not new. Ferreday and Locke (2007) made use of their participants' blogs to draw out narratives around gender identity and performance. Dobson (2012) studied young women's public MySpace profiles to reveal discourses around self-esteem, self-worth, and self-determination. Duguay (2014) facilitated interviews with her participants by having them navigate through their Facebook accounts while responding to interview questions, framing these accounts as a form of photo elicitation and memory aid. Also in concert with interviews, Marwick and boyd (2014: 1055) took screenshots of their participants' profiles, to contextualise discussions around social media use.

What is perhaps novel with our particular 'scroll back' method is our focus on the long-term, sustained use of the site. In this project we were not seeking to replicate the extant research on young people's social media use, but instead attend more closely to the temporal dimensions of sustained use, uncovering the archival nature of these Timelines, and investigating changes in disclosure practices over time. For this reason, Facebook was the ideal site for this scroll back method, but sites like Instagram and Twitter – and even largely disused but once popular sites like MySpace and Friendster – may also be better understood through a scroll back method. Further, we were intent on drawing our participants into the process of analysing their own digital traces, and reflecting on changes in their own disclosure practices over time, such that the 'scroll back' method became central to – and indeed the most time-consuming and compelling component of – the interviews themselves.

The temporal arrangement of disclosures requires further investigation. Are Facebook Timelines 'accurate' records of people's lives? As Hochman and Manovich (2013: 8) explain in relation to their large-scale 'data ethnography' on Instagram, 'photos are typically carefully curated and edited, sparsely uploaded, and are not always shared immediately'. Photos shared on Facebook are similarly often temporally dislocated: wedding photos uploaded weeks after the wedding, old photos of friends re-surfaced on birthdays, and images of lost loved ones posted around anniversaries. While Hochman and Manovich

(2013) convincingly argue for the value in analysing and interpreting digital traces over time on a large scale (with consideration given to time, place, and a range of cultural signifiers in photosets in the tens of thousands), we have opted to focus on the minutiae of digital trace-making. Whether towards the macro or the micro end of analysis, however, our objectives are similar: making sense of everyday digital traces, as records of life. Our scroll back method necessitates involving participants in this process as co-analysis, to make sense of and interrogate these digital traces.

‘Scrolling’ is a key activity on Facebook: scrolling through the ‘News Feed’ (a continuous rolling feed of ‘news’ created by the users’ Facebook ‘friends’), through the profiles of friends or potential new friends, or indeed scrolling back through their own profiles. Scrolling defines how people use and spend time on Facebook, a back-and-forward, continuous motion, where feeds never seem to end. The phrase also captures the ‘depth’ of material to be found there; that there is a lot of ‘stuff’ to be waded through. Given the centrality of scrolling as a practice, it seemed obvious that this process should be incorporated into a study of the site.

The scroll back method was developed to firstly enable us to view the content of our participants Timelines, but crucially to engage them in the research process as co-analysts of their own digital traces. As Marwick and boyd (2014) have shown, disclosures made through social media – especially when intended for a specific group of friends, rather than a wider networked public – are largely dependent on context and insider knowledge. Without recruiting our participants as co-analysts, to fill in blanks and provide context, the deeper meanings and absences are obfuscated for us as researchers. Indeed, for one of our participants, Robert (25), a certain set of private disclosures on Facebook were only shared with himself, invisible to other users, but kept for his own reflection: ‘This one is only visible by me... a set of little posts I wrote about my cardiac surgery in 2007... I was trying to write like a writer... back when I was 19 or whatever... looking back on it I sort of feel like I failed so I just restricted it’.

We firmly placed our participants in the control when it came to navigating their Timelines. Our participants sat in front of the computer we used, or held the iPad or smart phone (whatever device they chose to use) then clicked, tapped, and scrolled their way through their own profiles opening and closing elements of it as they liked. We looked on, probing

and asking questions, even directing them to certain parts of their Timelines, but importantly, they did the scrolling.

Given our interest in sustained use, we were keen for our participants to reflect upon their early Facebook use and the scroll back technique enabled them to do this quickly as they could literally go back to their very first disclosure on the site. In doing so, participants go 'back in time' through their own lives enabling us to take a diachronic approach to their 'growing up' narratives. As they scrolled back through their disclosures, participants narrated to the researcher the story of their lives as it unfolded. On average interviews lasted around one hour, but on occasions lasted up to 3 hours, and by the end of them participants often appeared to feel a sense of satisfaction. Even if at times these life narratives were messy and complicated, going back over their Timelines enabled them to see the 'overall picture' and how these events fitted into and shaped their current identities. In this respect and as Thomson and Holland (2003) suggest, such narrative analyses allow the researcher – and participant – to understand identity as a process and to consider how 'identities take shape and develop' (237).

As Paechter (2013) recounts, reflecting on her research on a divorce support website, time becomes compressed when looking back at a conversations archived on websites. In retrospect the threads of conversations can become 'opaque', and 'presented as a completed whole, in which the option to participate has been, if not removed, certainly rendered pointless' (Paechter 2013: 83). This sits in contrast with the immediacy of conversation flows we most commonly experience through social media. The scroll back method, then, can be confronting for participants as they encounter digital traces of memories and interactions that may or may not accord with their own recollections, perhaps (re)configured by the Facebook architecture of the day, and (re)interpreted through the lens of the present-day Facebook, where older posts might not have any 'likes' (before liking posts was introduced) or when status updates were formatted in the third person ('Sally is going to the shops...').

There were times when scrolling back could be difficult for the participant: stumbling over forgotten images that act as reminders of upsetting events, or confronting a forgotten past. In such instances, participants were asked if they wanted to stop or take a break, but often they chose just to pass over it, only to move on to something else or to provide a brief ex-

planation before moving on. The interview provided an opportunity to 'set time aside' (Authors 1, 2, and co-author) for participants to delve inside their Timelines, and consequently their lives. Being confronted with difficult memories and having the option to talk about them in the research setting was embraced by some participants.

Prior to the scroll back session, and after an initial discussion about social media use more generally, the participants were asked to note down on a piece of paper what they perceived to be their Timeline of 'critical' and 'fateful' (Giddens, 1991) moments since joining Facebook to the present day and the years in which these moments occurred (a technique utilised by Thomson et al. (2002) in their *Inventing Adulthood* study). Moments noted by the participants included: the start and end of relationships, moving schools, going to university, gaining employment, travel and attending events. This hand-written personal history, listing critical moments and broken down by year, was then 're-visited' in the next stage of the research process that was the scroll back through participants' Timelines. At this stage Facebook was used to elicit story-telling and to reveal which moments have and have not been disclosed on the site, serving as a point of comparison with the hand-written notes on critical moments over the past five to ten years.

Thus, within the qualitative interview, our methods included a hand-written timeline of critical moments followed by also scrolling back through participants' Facebook Timeline. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis. This was the only verbatim data collected because as we note above, we made the decision not to quote from Facebook itself to avoid the risk of traceability for our participants. We did not record the screens of our participants during the scroll back process as we wanted them to be able to skip over things easily, without the pressure of being recorded. Where there were things we wanted to dwell on, we would ask our participants questions or to explain further, thus committing these moments to the voice recording. However, as we also note above and below, we invited our participants to be 'friends' with us on the site before the interview took place. This enabled us to familiarise ourselves with some of the content: learn about them, develop an impression of how they used Facebook, and how their profiles were constructed both by them and their friends. This information was useful for 'breaking the ice' at the start of the interview and the logistics of organising the interview itself.

Remaining friends on the site after the interview (with the permission of the participants and under the proviso that we could be removed at any time) allowed us to go back into

profiles, revisit particular posts or clarify events when analysing the interview data, but we made the decision not to capture any of this other than in paraphrased notes. Participant's hand-written notes on critical moments served as a discussion point when moments or events did not appear on the Facebook Timeline and vice versa: comparing the two timelines revealed insights into the participants' disclosure practices, and what goes left unsaid on Facebook or is later erased.

The scroll back method has revealed a number of interesting findings, which are the focus of other future and forthcoming publications. For example, the scroll back method has revealed how participants measure the appropriateness of content for the site and the level of awareness they have for their audience. One participant noted how they had consciously made the decision not to post any status updates about the illness and subsequent death of a family member knowing that this would cause upset and distress for other family members who were also Facebook friends. This is despite the fact that she practically lived out all other aspects of her life on the site. Several participants reported that it wasn't considered 'cool' to post a 'happy birthday' message on the 'wall' of a close friend as this was an action that should be done in person or through a private one-on-one message; the more public performative dimension 'cheapened' the exchange. Another participant, a young trans man, spoke at length about the process of 'reloading' his life on a new Facebook profile after deleting his original profile (with his birth name and associated digital trace) by selectively re-uploading images of travel that did not make him feel dysphoric: 'I got to put things on my new Facebook that I wanted there and delete the stuff that I didn't want there' (Mark, 22). Still other participants talked about the process of going back and erasing certain images and disclosures that compromised a professional identity as they finished their studies and sought to enter into the workforce: 'we'd been aware for a while that transitioning from student to someone who's employed... there was a certain accepted kind of way that you're meant to conduct yourself on social media... particularly for photos but also what you post and talk about.' (Dina, 23). Others confronted previous romantic relationships, and pointed out where they had deleted images or erased status updates pertaining to ex-partners: 'Most of the photos [of ex-boyfriend] have been deleted... [current boyfriend] wasn't happy with seeing those kind of things' (Mary, 27). These narratives were rich and complex, revealed only through the presence of the participant as co-analyst in the scroll back method.

The scroll back method also shows us what participants have forgotten about their past, revealing what elements of their life narratives have only been 'dug up' through the research process. Scrolling back through Facebook is in many ways akin to archaeological excavation in this respect as this notion of 'digging up' or bringing forth a (forgotten) past (Mauthner, 2015) rang true on several occasions. For us, the scroll back method in conjunction with talking in-depth to our participants 'brings to life' Facebook and the use of the scroll back method alongside the interview was critical in revealing how the participants actually felt about looking back over their Timelines (read: lives).

"Their role is not to make friends": The ethics of using Facebook as a research tool  
Using Facebook Timelines as texts in research is extremely sensitive. On the one hand as qualitative researchers we cannot help but relish the prospect of being able to work with such rich records and, as we will conclude, Facebook profiles potentially offer the researcher previously unseen quantities of detailed information about individuals stored in one place, often on an everyday, quasi-'naturalistic' basis and organised chronologically. Before our very eyes we have longitudinal life narratives of young people's growing up stories – sometimes the quality of which have been the stuff of dreams for qualitative researchers engaging in longitudinal research. However, what is crucial here is that for us, these are not archives that have been kept for a research project. These are personal archives produced through everyday interactions, 'managed' by an individual but co-constituted by a networked public of people through tags, comments, and uploads, and 'curated' by Facebook (Gehl 2014). As we have discovered, these archives can be central to the working through, piecing together and understanding of a young person's identity. In this respect, we were extremely sensitive in our approach and this meant thinking carefully about the ethical implications of using this type of data not meant for research, for research.

One of the obvious complications that adds to this relates to notions of public and private and where in fact Facebook exists within these binary oppositions. As we note above, the work of scholars such as Marwick and boyd (2011) and Vitak (2012) argue that social network sites like Facebook operate in an environment of 'context collapse' when the boundaries of public and private are collapsed down and thus young people are 'moving' around, blurring previously firm boundaries. This raises important ethical questions, flagged by Thomson et al. (2013: 13) who ask 'what might it mean for people to engage in social sci-

ence research without the promise of anonymity, and how might different aspects of confidentiality be explored in relation to “context collapse?”. We had to consider this question carefully in our planning while finding a balance between engaging the participants as co-analysts who were very much at the ‘helm’ of the scroll back process with respecting their privacy and ensuring anonymity and confidentiality.

After recruiting our participants through posters, flyers, email and Facebook, our first step was to become Facebook ‘friends’ prior to our first interview. Author 1 has written elsewhere about the ethical and methodological challenges that must be negotiated when it comes to friending participants for the purposes of participant observation. In the context of this project, we friended our participants (or accepted friend requests from them) so that we could get some initial ideas on participants’ interests, frequency of posts, and a sense of what they were posting. Likewise, the participant could do the same with our profiles. We made it clear to the participants that they could limit the content we had access to as ‘friends’.

On meeting with the participants in person, each were given a consent form and participant information sheet outlining the aims and objectives of the study, their role and importantly, how their privacy would be respected and how confidentiality and anonymity would be ensured. The participant information sheet also included a note on the longevity of the ‘friendship’ – a point that was contested by Author 2’s University ethics committee that was keen to see the ‘friendship’ terminated at the end of the study (as with Miller’s 2011 study). Author 1’s ethics committee on the other hand were willing to accept that the ‘friendship’ continue on beyond the formal research, in line with feminist scholarship around ‘cultivating relationships with research subjects in ways that engender a sense of interaction, participation and involvement’ (Rumens, 2008: 17).

In the main, the interview process and the scroll back method specifically achieved the desired outcome. It allowed us to get a sense of how our participants’ disclosure practices have changed over time, and has revealed to us complex and layered life narratives, whereby Facebook is framed as an archive of memories or at least a prompt through which memory is triggered.

Participants themselves also reported that they had found the experience simultaneously interesting, odd, and revelatory. In scrolling back through their Facebook Timelines, interpreting and ordering these narratives for an outsider (us, as researchers) gave them an opportunity to reflect and realise that their lives had been more eventful than they had previously thought. They also reported that they had become more aware of the sorts of disclosures they were making, and further considered issues around privacy. In some cases participants stated that they would be more cautious about what they posted in the future. Others went as far as to say they would scroll back over their profiles again so that they could 'delete stuff' or comment again on old posts so they could be re-surfaced to share and reminisce with friends.

### **Facebook Timelines and the Temporal: Back to the Future in Qualitative Research?**

According to Thomson and Holland (2003: 234) QLR seeks to 'document, record and understand the temporal process of change over time'. The 'temporal' is a key aspect in their definition of doing qualitative longitudinal research and they highlight the issues and problems with such methods that require a series of interviews to take place over several years, often with a quite significant time lapse in between and often with participants dropping in and out of the research. The very fact that Facebook chose the terminology 'Timeline' in the creation of a function that archives and makes accessible disclosures on the site clearly captures how they have capitalised on users' interactions. In this respect, the temporal is a key aspect of the site: it does not just capture a 'snapshot' of what is happening in the present but (automatically and by default) archives the past, the scrolling back over which – to use Berthoud's (2000) terminology – 'captures a movie' of their lives (in Neale & Flowerdew, 2003: 190). Our research has revealed the sheer amount of data that Facebook holds, and scrolling back with participants also made this evident to them.

Is our research longitudinal? It is not longitudinal in the sense that we have been working with our participants over an extended period of time or re-interviewing them. We are not engaged in a process of reflection from one interview to the next, using interviews to build life stories, histories and narratives over substantial periods of time. At this stage, we have no plans to re-interview our participants although this would certainly be a serious consideration at some point and would add depth to our data. What we would argue, however, is that the Facebook Timelines project contests some notions of what constitutes longitudinal



research and how it should be carried out. Our study provides an example of how researchers can use social media in their research as longitudinal traces of users' lives.

What we would also argue is that Facebook has given the young people in our study a platform through which to produce and curate their own longitudinal life narratives, albeit within the confines of Facebook's own curatorial algorithmic architecture (Gehl 2014). These narratives are variously shaped by friends who co-construct each others' digital traces by uploading and tagging images, posting to walls, and linking Timelines together through the many affordances of Facebook as a 'networked public' (boyd 2014). While some participants had previously scrolled back through their own Timelines, 'sterilising' and re-ordering them for professional employment and 'adult life' (which we unpack elsewhere, Authors forthcoming), other participants had little sense of the archival depth of Facebook produced through sustained use. However, once this archive is opened up through the scroll back method, the participants get to see their own histories unfold before them, as they reflect on their past selves, assessing and evaluating who they were then and who they are now. Reflecting again on Berthoud's (in Neale & Flowerdew 2003) movie analogy, the research process combines both a 'snapshot' and 'a movie' of our participant's lives: a snapshot of where they feel they are at now (hand-written personal history), alongside a 'movie' of their histories played out through Facebook and narrated through the scroll back method with 'the ending' still being played out on the site as they begin to think about their future use and presentation of self on the site.

Thomson and Holland (2003) argue that a longitudinal approach to qualitative research means looking 'cross sectionally in order to identify discourses through which identities are constructed, and longitudinally at the development of a particular narrative over time' (236). This can be achieved to an extent using the scroll back method combined with an in-depth interview. For example, the cross sections through which identities are constructed emerge from this methodological process and are discussed throughout with the participant. It becomes apparent after a period of time scrolling back that discourses around travel, education, relationships and so on start to 'matter' (Mauthner, 2015) in the context of that person's growing up narrative. Further, we are able to cross-reference these emerging themes with other participants drawing out dominant discourses surrounding our sample of young people in their twenties who have used Facebook for a sustained period of time. At the end of the scroll back process, and as the participants make their

way up towards more recent disclosures, there is a genuine feeling that they have witnessed unfold, and given voice to, a self-narrative. In this respect, the dominant discourses that appear to be driving the narratives (for example, beginning to look for jobs after finishing university) of our participants take on an important role as they begin to edit and manage their Facebook Timelines more consciously to produce presentations of themselves that represent them in deliberate 'outward' rather than 'inward' facing ways.

## **Conclusion**

In this article we have reported on the research design and methodology developed for a qualitative research project entitled Facebook Timelines. This study was designed to explore the significance of sustained Facebook use in the lives of young people in their twenties, living in the northwest of England and in Tasmania, Australia. The study was centered around what we have described here as the 'scroll back' method, devised as a way for us to explore the content of our participants' Facebook Timelines as a component of a traditional semi-structured in-depth interview. The Timeline serves as a prompt to elicit storytelling about young people's experiences of growing up as documented on Facebook. Crucially, the method was devised to ensure that the participants themselves played an integral role as co-analysts of their digital traces on Facebook which we deemed of key importance given the highly sensitive nature of the data, not originally generated for research purposes.

In addition to presenting this method, we have suggested that our approach might work to extend the qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) tradition. We have argued that while our study is limited in a range of ways, in terms of how disclosures are generated (for a specific audience or audiences, and not for research purposes at the time), there is a longitudinal dimension to this study. The very nature of Facebook as an archive of disclosures 'stored' indefinitely makes these narratives 'longitudinal by default', revised and re-ordered only through effort. In employing the scroll back method, we argue that comprehensive life narratives are revealed, not just to the researcher, but to the participant who may not have previously considered the length and depth of their digital traces on the scale that we invite them to here.

When coupled with other, more traditional forms of qualitative research like the semi-structured in-depth interview, the scroll back method may be of value to other researchers concerned with life narratives. As the social media landscape continues to change and evolve, other forms of social media may also figure into this scroll back method. Social media like Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, reddit, and Pinterest also operate on the 'archive by default' approach of Facebook. However, other forms of social media, like Snapchat, trouble these longitudinal digital traces by privileging ephemerality, with disclosures persisting only for a matter of seconds. It is unclear how social media will change in the future, but it is clear that this terrain is changing rapidly, and researchers must approach social media in an informed, ethically reflexive way. Whereas in quantitative approaches, large data sets from social media are being 'mined' and 'harvested', a qualitative approach has much to offer when it comes to discussions of consent, intentionality, recruiting participants as co-analysts, and treating this 'data' as an often personal record of lived experience.

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