

Stop digital platforms treating people as lab rats

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In his World View article, Tim Weiss argues that digital platforms increasingly treat users as unwitting participants in experiments, and points out the real-world consequences this has had on gig workers seeking work through job-listing programs ([T. Weiss *Nature* 635, 259; 2024](#)). But the robust ethical framework he calls for to enforce transparency, informed consent and accountability is unlikely to be enough on its own.

My research shows that the public holds strong, sceptical views on social-media experiments. Nearly 40% of users most value transparency — a higher percentage than for any other factor, including research purpose and the impact of an intervention — and many view practices such as deploying bots or sending private messages as ethically troubling ([V. J. Straub *et al. Sci. Rep.* 14, 26110; 2024](#)). This feedback highlights that attempts to develop ethical standards must involve the public from the start.

Governance in digital research ethics should be participatory, similar to existing proposals for direct user involvement in shaping research practices in artificial intelligence ([A. Birhane *et al. Proc. 2nd ACM Conf. Equity Access Algorithms Mech. Optim.* <https://doi.org/grnj99>; 2022](#)). Citizen juries, community advisory boards and co-design workshops with users could all provide input on experimental protocols, ensuring ethical decisions and reducing risks. Relying on self-regulation is wishful thinking: public trust demands public input and involvement.