Social media provides a window into the mental health of adolescents. Interpersonal relationships, bullying, and social connectedness are just a few examples of behaviors that can be explored on social media. Natural language processing and machine learning techniques are now being used to evaluate social media posts by identifying words associated with suicidal risk. However, many ethical issues must be considered before undertaking this type of research.

Using a case study approach, I will illustrate ethical issues that we are currently facing in our research of adolescent social media usage and will suggest potential protections against risk. First, I will address issues surrounding informed consent. In the state of Pennsylvania, children age 14 and older are legally able to consent for their own mental health treatment. Is it appropriate to waive parental permission for this type of research? Is child assent sufficient? Next, I will address ethical concerns about accessing social media in mental health research with teens. How should information posted by social media "friends" who have not consented to participate in research be handled? How should photographs be handled? Finally, I will discuss reporting issues. Should any information be reported back to parents? What information should be reported to therapists? Mandated reporter laws address the need to report imminent danger to self or others and child abuse, but what about risky behaviors that fall into more "gray" areas, such as alcohol and substance use, bullying, and “sexting” behavior?