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What ethical issues are raised by increased anonymity

Return to Article Details Ethical Issues in Designing Internet-Based Research: Recommendations for Good Practice As the amount of online social interaction has increased, social researchers have found new ways to study people online. In a book such as this it can be tempting to focus on the 'how to' technical considerations of online research, but it is also important to think about the 'whether to' and 'what to do' considerations of research ethics. One of the main considerations is to ensure that ethical practice remains up to date and relevant in a world where technology is rapidly changing and impacting on how people think about issues such as confidentiality, privacy and obtaining informed consent. Many of the ethical issues which researchers need to consider and address prior to commencing research online require them to adopt similar ethical frameworks and practices to those employed in onsite research. However, the internet also opens up new ethical challenges and reframes existing ones. Online researchers are more readily able to bypass gatekeepers, access semi-private data, eavesdrop, deceive, re-use and re-analyse data than was previously possible. What was often difficult and time-consuming in onsite research has frequently become straightforward online. Ethics in social science research Considering how to conduct research in an appropriate and ethical way has always been important for social science researchers. Over recent years, in the UK and other countries, this broader raft of ethical concern and practice has become increasingly subject to formal regulation (ESRC 2010). This has meant the establishment of ethics panels built on a model borrowed from health science (Richardson and McMullan 2007), alongside the development of a variety of ethical frameworks and guides. This process has not been without its critics, and has variously been critiqued as bureaucratic, inappropriate and constraining of academic freedom (Lewis 2008; Sikkes and Piper 2010; Stanley and Wise 2010). 26This chapter does not seek to debate the system of ethical regulation in social research. It does however wish to make a strong argument that ethical considerations are important to social research and to social research on the internet in particular. For those new to social research ethics there are a number of useful texts which provide an overview, such as Research Ethics for Social Scientists (Israel and Hay's 2006); The Handbook of Social Research Ethics (Mertens and Ginsberg 2008); The Student's Guide to Research Ethics (Oliver 2010). This chapter looks at how some of the issues covered in these more general texts on research ethics are reframed in the online environment. Ethics in online research Discussion of research ethics can be found throughout most of the history of online research methods. There was considerable debate on the matter as early as 1996 (Allen 1996; Boehlefeld 1996; King 1996; Reid 1996; Thomas 1996). Early discussions focused on whether there was a need to develop specific guidelines for online research. Frankel and Siang argued that new guidelines were needed (Frankel and Siang 1999), whereas Walther countered this by arguing that many of the features of internet research were similar to existing offline research (Walther 2002). The work of Ess and the Association of Internet Researchers provided a series of recommendations addressing ethical decision making and internet research, which both acknowledged the similarities between online and onsite research whilst also recognizing the new challenges that the online environment presents (Ess 2002). Although they are now ten years old, the recommendations of Ess and the Association of Internet Researchers are still relevant to those undertaking online research. More recent ethical thinking has focused on researching the social networks that are facilitated by online social tools. This chapter discusses some of the specific ethical issues and challenges which online research presents, and explores how other researchers have addressed these. These include new ethical challenges such as the way in which many web technologies create a permanent record and the subsequent possibility of connecting isolated observations or utterances to specific individuals. Many of these technologically facilitated phenomena have no offline equivalent, and raise the need to re-think existing ethical practices as they blur the distinctions in existing dichotomies such as public/private, published/unpublished, local/international and expert/amateur (Eysenbach and Till 2001; Hudson and Bruckman 2005; Bos, Karahalios, Chávez, Poole, Thomas, and Yardi 2009). A further challenge in relation to online research ethics is the complexity of the legal environment that regulates online activity. Navigating through this complexity can be challenging for the online researcher, especially in cases where the relevant legislative framework is more permissive than the ethical position that the researcher or their code of conduct suggests is appropriate. So, for example, it may be legally permissible for a researcher to download and analyse discussions from online public forums without the original contributors' consent, but is this approach ethical if the contributors did not post their messages with the expectation that they would be used in this way? This chapter does not set out to answer comprehensively all the ethical questions that online research raises, rather it seeks to encourage researchers to recognize the ethical pluralism that exists in online research (Ess 2002; Ess 2010) and to understand that there are multiple responses to ethical issues. Given this lack of formal absolutes it is important that researchers have the ability to adapt existing ethical approaches creatively and critically to the new social formations and research approaches that are enabled by technological changes. The web, and in particular the growth of social media, has resulted in increased self-disclosure by web users who provide often detailed accounts of their 'private' life through, for example, tweets, status updates and blogs which are publically accessible to other web users. This has resulted in a blurring of the boundary between what is public and private data on the web, and puts researchers in a difficult position where they have to consider whether users' perceptions of their own privacy align with the 'public' nature of the interface they are utilising. Many online researchers have attempted to determine the status of public online data and activity by considering them to be either (i) accessible to anyone with an internet connection or (ii) data/activity that is perceived to be public by participants (even though researchers are not the intended audience) (Rosenberg 2010). Whiteman, and Langer and Beckman, have taken this stance to justify lurking in, and downloading from, postings to public 32discussion boards without members' knowledge (Whiteman 2010; Langer and Beckman 2005). Grodzinsky and Tavani draw upon Nissenbaum's work to examine the specific privacy issues related to blogging, and reach a similar conclusion that 'authors of (non password-protected) blogs have no reasonable expectation of their personal privacy being normatively protected' (Grodzinsky and Tavani 2010: 45; Nissenbaum 2004). Thelwall goes further, arguing that human subject standards do not apply to studies of publically available data because it is the publication, and not the person, which is being researched (Thelwall 2010). Other researchers have taken a different position on this issue and have argued that online conversations retain elements of personal/private communication despite their openness. So Kozinets argues that researchers should be cautious when considering whether the online environment is a public or private space (Kozinets 2010). He goes on to suggest that researchers should disclose their presence during research and gain informed consent. Whiteman explores how her original ethical stance regarding the public nature of the discussion boards she was studying was challenged when the privacy settings changed part way through her research. She also goes on to explain the mixed reaction she got from the discussion board users when she provided them with links to her research findings – with some of them sharing her view that the data were public and others considering her work to be voyeuristic. Rosenberg also found a lack of agreement regarding what constituted public space amongst users of Second Life (Rosenberg 2010). Driscoll and Gregg stress how important it is for researchers to consider the specific contexts, practices and expectations of the online communities and spaces they are researching in order that they can reflect on, and justify, their ethical position (Driscoll and Gregg 2010). However, the findings of Rosenberg and Whiteman demonstrate the difficulties that exist in reaching consensus regarding what is public and what is private both amongst researchers and internet users. A closely related issue to that of privacy is if, and how, researchers should negotiate and gain informed consent for research conducted online. Informed consent involves an individual being provided with, and comprehending information, about the study which is relevant to their participation and, on the basis of this information, making the decision 33to voluntarily participate in it. Whilst the issue of informed consent can be challenging in offline research, once again the online environment adds to the complexity. The online nature of the interaction between the researcher and potential participant, especially if text-based and asynchronous, can make it more difficult to ensure that the participant has sufficient information about the research and what it will entail. O'Connor and Madge suggest that researchers can mitigate some of these issues by providing links to further information about the research and the researchers (O'Connor and Madge 2003). Other strategies include providing a list of frequently asked questions. However, as the case-study by Bull et al. highlighted, participants do not always fully engage with such information when it is provided. Varnhagen et al. report similarities in gaining consent through online forms and through paper documents (Varnhagen, Gushta, Daniels, Peters, Parmar, Law, Hirsch, Takach and Johnson 2005). They also provide suggestions as to how to increase the accessibility and readability of online consent forms and improve participant recall of their content. However, even with such measures, it is more difficult for a researcher to confirm that the participant is able to give consent and, for example, ensure that they are not from a vulnerable group. Grimes discusses a range of issues surrounding informed consent and children's comprehension of privacy and terms of service statements related to gaming sites (Grimes 2008). However, many of the issues Grimes raises are equally applicable to adult internet users and include: Difficulties in navigating the ambiguous boundary between public and private. Lack of recognition that the gaming site/online environment being used is a commercial entity. Lack of understanding of the ways in which their data and online behaviour could be used (for example, being sold as market research reports). Terms of service and privacy policies often hidden within the site, densely worded and in legal language which is not accessible to the target audience. Different ethical practices between market researchers and academic researchers. Online spaces and communities comprise a range of individuals with varying agendas and levels of participation, and this diversity can complicate 34the negotiation of access and informed consent. Shirky describes how online social interactions tend to follow a power law distribution. In other words, in online communities there are typically a small number of participants who are very active and a large number who are almost inactive but who still remain a part of the community (Shirky 2003; 2009). In such circumstances identifying and gaining informed consent from all of these individuals may be unrealistic (if not impossible) and some researchers have instead sought consent from gatekeepers prior to undertaking research (Barratt and Lenton 2010; Im, Chee, Tsai, Bender and Lim 2007). For some research it may be that seeking consent from participants, whether directly or through a gatekeeper, may have a negative effect on the phenomena under study, either by changing participants' behaviour or because the researcher is not likely to be welcomed by the community or participants they are studying (Chen, Hall and Johns 2004). In these situations some researchers (Whiteman 2010) have lurked and observed behaviour without the knowledge of the users, and others (Lamb 1998) have utilized deception as part of their research approach. The issue of deception, whether in online or offline research, always raises serious ethical concerns for researchers. Whitty explores the ethical issues associated with both lurking and deception in online dating sites, and concludes that in that particular context deception which includes posing as a potential date is not acceptable (Whitty 2004). Nagel et al. further explored the ethical issues associated with online deception. In their study they created a virtual student, through whom they facilitated specific learning interventions during an online postgraduate course (Nagel, Bignaut and Conje 2007). This research was approved through their institution's research ethics approval process, and they explore the issues they addressed as well as the mixed reaction they encountered from the students when the real nature of the virtual student was revealed at the end of the course. This included both a feeling of betrayal at the deception, as well as an acknowledgement of the role that the virtual student had played in students' learning. Anonymity and confidentiality in offline research, anonymity and confidentiality are frequently used to protect participants' identities. Anonymity refers to a situation when no one, including the researcher, can relate a participant's identity to 35any information related to the project. Confidentiality describes the situation where the researchers know the participant's identity but have undertaken not to reveal it to others. Whilst the same concepts apply in online research, the nature of the internet and the way in which online data is collected may inadvertently mean a researcher cannot offer participants the same level of anonymity or confidentiality. For example, a researcher running an online survey may not need to collect any personal information about their participants, and thus believe that their survey is completely anonymous. However if the survey platform they are using collects users' IP addresses, then there is a theoretical possibility that a participant's response could be linked back to them. Whilst the chance of this happening may appear small, it has been a particular issue which researchers such as Comber – who undertook online research into illicit drug activities (Coomber 1997) – have had to contend with in order that they could assure their participants that the data they provided could not be utilized by enforcement agencies. While it can be difficult to guarantee absolute anonymity, the issue of confidentiality is even more challenging when undertaking research online. Even though individuals' identities can be disguised through the use of pseudonyms, it may be relatively straightforward to re-identify individuals. The power of tools such as Google means that any direct quotation used in the dissemination of research findings can be easily traced back to its original context. In addition, it may be possible to re-identify individuals by triangulating data from various online sources, as was demonstrated by Sweeney who used zip code, date of birth and gender to identify the Governor of Massachusetts' health record from a supposedly anonymized publically available dataset (Sweeney 2000). Further issues of confidentiality and anonymity specifically related to the re-use and archiving of qualitative data for secondary analysis are discussed by Parry and Mauthner (Parry and Mauthner 2004). These include the challenge for participants in giving their informed consent for research which extends beyond the original study. The ethical frameworks used to address privacy, consent and anonymity have been considered more broadly by Carusi and O'Riordan, who reflect upon the relational aspects of internet research (Carusi 2008; O'Riordan 2010). O'Riordan questions the pressure which researchers face to conform to human-subject models of informed consent and anonymity. Carusi takes the discussion of the ethics of confidentiality and privacy 36further to distinguish between the conceptions of 'thin' and 'thick' identity (Carusi 2008: 41). She describes thin identity as 'the identity of a particular individual as a re-identifiable entity', whereas thick identity refers to 'that individual's experience of their own personhood, their own subjective or psychological sense of who they are'. She goes on to consider the role that researchers may play in mediating and representing participants' identities, and the extent to which this may align with the participants' own 'thick' identity. Legal and ethical considerations are frequently intertwined and considered together during the process of ethical review of research. Generally, it would not be considered ethical for a researcher to undertake research that involves breaking the law but, as has already been noted, there may be situations where the law permits something which lies outside accepted ethical standards. In online research the situation once again becomes more complex, and researchers need to be aware of the legislation surrounding copyright, intellectual property, data ownership, transfer and storage. This is further complicated when online research is international and researchers are potentially operating in other or multi- jurisdictions. Charlesworth provides a helpful exploration of the key legal issues involved in conducting online research, and identifies some of the strategies that researchers can use to mitigate these legal risks (Charlesworth 2008). His chapter particularly considers the UK legal framework. Lipinski addresses legal issues, particularly negligence, for researchers utilizing data from online forums and postings (Lipinski 2008). Lipinski's work particularly considers these issues from a US perspective. Another legal aspect which arises in relation to online research are the contractual Terms of Service (ToS) to which online participants agree when they sign up to online communities, social networks and games sites. In many instances the detail of the ToS may result in users transferring some of their legal rights to site owners. For example, in 2009 there was considerable uproar when Facebook changed elements of its ToS in relation to content ownership (CNN 2009). Online researchers need to consider who owns the data that they wish to utilize in their study, and to recognize that the ToS for some online sites may restrict or specifically prevent them from utilizing data for research purposes. Reynolds and De Zwart address this issue in their examination of the ToS of a number of Massively Multi-player Online Role Play Games (MMOs), and consider the implications of these for ethnographic researchers who participate as players in these games (Reynolds and De Zwart 2010). Although the issues briefly outlined here intersect with many of the ethical issues already discussed, including privacy and consent, they bring in additional dimensions which it is important for the online researcher to be aware of if they are to mitigate legal risks. Participant vulnerability One of the particular advantages of online research is that it enables researchers to access isolated and hard-to-reach populations. Online communities often gather around sensitive issues, and this may also result in their being considered vulnerable, such as the cancer patients studied by Im et al. (Im, Chee, Tsai, Bender and Lim 2007). In other cases it may be that vulnerable participants are recruited because they form part of the wider population being studied (such as children who participate in online game sites). Existing mechanisms for participant and researcher protection may not be sufficient in the online environment because, as Stern notes, 'given both the nature of online communication and research, those who study internet users and communities may find themselves particularly likely to come across distressing information in their research' (Stern 2003). Whilst it is not possible to plan for all situations, it is important that researchers have considered in advance how they will deal with distressing information and/or vulnerable participants. Their strategy will need to be documented and considered by an ethics approval process prior to the commencement of research. If appropriate this information should also be shared with participants. Nevertheless, even when researchers have considered such issues in advance, dealing with them is likely to be difficult and throw up new challenges. Stern and Seko provide examples of the approaches online researchers have taken to participant disclosures related to self-harm/suicide (Seko 2006). A different perspective on considerations related to participant vulnerability is provided by O'Connor (O'Connor 2010). He discusses the responsibilities that researchers who are undertaking health-related research have in addressing the promulgation of incorrect medical information in online communities. He suggests approaches that researchers can adopt 38in such circumstances, but it should be noted that researchers need to have appropriate specialist expertise to identify and address the risks that such situations pose. Ethics are situated and contextualized within research design and methodology – but this doesn't give researchers free rein to justify any approach, nor does it mean that broader ethical frameworks are not useful. All ethical codes are fluid and dynamic, and perhaps no more so than with online research where the fast pace of technological advancement potentially magnifies this dynamism. Thus the particular ethical decisions and justifications which other researchers have convincingly made even in the relatively recent past may no longer be appropriate due to, for example, changes in the ways in which users interact with online technologies (Boellstorff 2006) or changes in system architecture (Whiteman 2010). Online researchers also have to consider and negotiate the intersection of legal and ethical frameworks, and these can redefine and reshape ethical concepts such as privacy, consent and confidentiality. More comprehensive coverage of the topics raised here is provided in a number of publications specifically addressing the issue of online ethics. These include Digital Media Ethics (Digital Media and Society) (Ess 2009), 'The ethics of internet research' (Eynon, Fry and Schroeder 2008), 'The Ethics of Internet Research (McKee and Porter 2009); the International Journal of Internet Research Ethics (. There are also articles addressing specific disciplinary approaches such as psychology, 'Practical advice for conducting ethical online experiments and questionnaires for United States psychologists' (Barchard and Williams 2008), and ethnography, 'My profile: The ethics of virtual ethnography' (Driscoll and Gregg 2010). In addition there are forums such as the Association of Internet Researchers wiki that provide opportunities for researchers to debate the specific issues and challenges related to undertaking research online.

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