

# Ethical Dilemmas in Online Research

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## INTRODUCTION

Online research raises unique ethical concerns (Ess & AoIR, 2002), including the treatment and recruitment of participants, gaining consent, accessing electronic forms of data, privacy, and responsibility to the participants of online mediums (e.g., discussion lists and groups). Until the mid-1990s, very little attention was paid to ethical issues in online research for the following reasons:

- This communication medium was a very recent phenomenon (Ess & AoIR, 2002; Mann & Stewart, 2000)
- Internet research posed different ethical challenges for researchers in comparison to conventional face-to-face settings
- Existing ethical regulations and ethics review boards did not cover the new ethical issues raised by Internet research
- It was too difficult to develop a uniform code of ethical conduct for Internet research given the diverse disciplines, countries, and cultural groups using the Internet (Ess & AoIR, 2002)
- The complexity of Internet technology itself, which made adapting conventional ethical practices and

processes problematic (Anders cited in Mann & Stewart, 2000; Mann & Stewart, 2000; Thomas, 1996; Whittaker, 2002)

## BACKGROUND

All researchers, including online researchers, must deal with ethical issues. Those most commonly cited include anonymity (and pseudonymity) of participants, recruitment of participants, publication of results, and balancing research benefits against harms (see Table 1). However, the ways in which online researchers handle these ethical issues are highly contested because of the unique nature of computer-mediated communication (CMC) environments and the practical difficulties of applying ethical principles in this environment (Walther, 2002). For example, who do you approach to obtain informed consent in an online political discussion list—the list moderator or each of the participants? Does it make a difference if the list is closed (moderated) or open? How do we inform participants about a research project in a multi-user domain (MUD) environment without disturbing the natural “interactions” in these forums? Is it sufficient for current ethical conventions to obtain consent via e-mail, or should

*Table 1. Summary of ethical issues in Internet research (Allen, 1996; Bassett & O’Riordan, 2002; Ess & AoIR, 2002; Herring, 1996; Jones, 1999; Mann & Stewart, 2000; Walther, 2002; White, 1996)*

<p>The Internet provides increased research opportunities but raises new ethical issues, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• large amount of data available on Internet in a wide variety of forms (e.g., e-mail, chat rooms, instant messaging, MUDs, MOOS, USENET newsgroups), available to researchers who can access it without seeking permission or ethical clearance due to the open nature of this medium;</li><li>• wide variety of views on Internet research ethics based on disciplinary knowledge bases;</li><li>• unequal access to Internet around the globe;</li><li>• English is main language of Internet—limits the study of different cultures’ approaches to ethical issues;</li><li>• different power dynamics operate in Internet research compared to conventional settings;</li><li>• Internet is a unique technological, cultural, and social environment that should not be subject to same ethical codes as conventional research; and</li><li>• need for flexible ethical guidelines that are not overly prescriptive and can accommodate the needs of different disciplines, Internet users, and cultures</li></ul>
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ethics committees insist on a signed hardcopy from each respondent (Mann & Stewart, 2000)? It is easy to see why some researchers are deterred by the daunting task and impracticality of applying conventional ethical procedures to CMC and developing new ethical procedures to obtain consent in this medium (Anders, 2000 cited in Mann & Stewart, 2000).

The ethical problems involved in online research are not immediately obvious to the novice or mature researcher. For example, the open and accessible nature of CMC provides researchers with the opportunity to harvest data in covert and unobtrusive ways, such as “lurking” online in discussion forums. Different countries and cultures possess a range of views and laws governing privacy, ownership, and use of electronic forms of data. In some countries with strict regulation of human research, using covert forms of data collection without informing participants is not usually approved of. This is because of increased public scrutiny of medical and social research following the abuses of World War II and, in some instances, as recently as the 1950s and 1960s (Dodds, Albury, & Thomson, 1994; Capurro & Pingel, 2002).

There is considerable variation in researchers’ responses to online ethical concerns. For example, Denzin (1999, cited in Mann & Stewart, 2000) used data without following the ethical protocols of obtaining consent and informing participants that he was using the material for research purposes. In contrast, Reid (1996) went to considerable effort to obtain consent before conducting research online. A number of writers, including Boehlefeld (1996) and King (1996), warn online researchers to pay *specific* attention to ethical issues. If they do not, they run the risk of alienating the public and cutting off their supply of data and participants. Ignoring ethical issues can have a flow-on effect to other researchers (Boehlefeld, 1996). It can increase suspicion about researchers’ motives and use of electronic data for research.

### DEBATES ABOUT ETHICS AND ONLINE RESEARCH

A wide range of people from different disciplines engage in Internet research, yet the social sciences and humanities have dominated debates about the role of human beings in online research. One issue that causes considerable controversy between the social sciences and the humanities is their competing views about the public/private nature of the Internet (Melville, 2004). This raises important questions about the nature of CMC, technology, and the rights and obligations of researchers and those who use the Internet. For some writers, all CMC (except for closed e-mail lists) is seen as “public space”

(Paccagnella, 1997, cited in Mann & Stewart, 2000). Described as the cyberspace equivalent of a public park or street (Waskul & Douglass, 1996), they are regarded as “public,” accessible, and open and available to anyone to observe and record what occurs in them (Walther, 2002). As such, individuals cannot expect privacy and confidentiality. White (2002) goes further, arguing that it is not the individual researcher’s responsibility to guarantee anonymity in data collection or reporting.

If confusion, ambivalence, or ignorance exists about what is public information (and, therefore, fair game for researchers), industry professionals and moderators/controllers of public and semi-private space should correct the problem (Walther, 2002; Whittaker, 2002). Some people who are well versed in using CMC (such as activists, academics, and computer professionals) have no doubts about what they view as publicly available (Bruckman, 2002). They tend to view the majority of the Internet (apart from closed lists) as a public space. Many possess the technical skills to use software that will trawl through vast amounts of archived and current material on the Internet. If the majority of information on the Internet is seen as public documents, images, text, and language, then anyone should be able to access it without asking permission, protecting privacy and/or identity, or justifying their (research) activities and published outcomes.

Others argue that the Internet cannot be viewed simply as private or public (King, 1996; Waskul & Douglass, 1996). Waskul and Douglass (1996) argues that it has both public and private spaces. When we recognise this, we can work out what expectations people have about their postings. It is possible to work out a graduated scale at one end of which we can locate a public forum where all postings are accessible to anyone who enters the space. The expectation of those people posting and reading the material is that that material is clearly in the public arena (Walther, 2002). In contrast, for King (1996) it possible to designate those areas where all material is private and accessed by only those who have consent and permission (e.g., e-mail, listservs, some chatrooms, and bulletin boards).

The need to protect the participant’s privacy and identity in an online setting is also supported by the findings that people are more likely to self-disclose personal information using CMC than they would in face-to-face situations such as focus groups and interviews (Hessler, 2003; King, 1996; Mann & Stewart, 2000). This is an interesting finding. It means that participants have different notions of their personal-self “boundaries” than was previously assumed by Internet researchers (King, 1996; Waskul & Douglass, 1996). Some participants find it helpful to disclose in what they see as a safer, more anonymous environment where they cannot be seen or heard. They also feel that the information about them

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