Ethical issues in online research

Chris Jones, Reader in the Institute of Educational Technology, The Open University

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Summary

This resource provides a brief introduction to online research ethics. This is a rapidly changing and interdisciplinary field in which established ethical procedures need constant reconsideration. The resource reflects on some general arguments about ethics in online research and considers why this field has different ethical concerns to many traditional environments. It then examines three key issues in the context of online research: privacy and public availability, anonymity and confidentiality, and informed consent. The resource provides references and links to further sources including Web sites that will contain updated material, an important consideration in a research area that changes so quickly.

Online Research

Online research presents new ethical problems and recasts old ones in new guises. The changing research landscape presents challenges to existing ethics frameworks but it cannot be assumed that research using the Internet is intrinsically more risky than any other kind of research (Orton-Johnson 2010).

There are several ways that research related to new technological environments can be

described. 'Online research' situates the research as being related to the Internet and it is one of the older terms in use. Other terms include 'Internet research', 'virtual research', 'cyberspace research', 'e-research' and 'digital research'. Each of these terms can carry a slightly different meaning, and they are often associated with a certain time period, but for general purposes they cover essentially the same field and a range of common ethical concerns.

One interesting feature of this kind of research, which has strong ethical implications, is the emergent legal infrastructure that constantly requires revision and development. The law is often slow in catching up with technological developments and this increases the need for researchers to take an ethical stance because self-regulation and responsibility are sometimes the only constraints, as the law may be undeveloped in the area being researched (see Mann & Stewart 2000 39-40).

The Internet can be viewed from several standpoints in relation to research ethics:

- The Internet as a tool for research

- The Internet as a means to conduct research

- The Internet as a medium for research

- The Internet as a locale for research

- The Internet as a means to distribute research

The Internet as a tool for research may appear the same as the Internet as a means to conduct research but the distinction rests on the direct or indirect way that the Internet is used. Also it may not be immediately obvious that distribution can become an ethical issue: for example, a research subject may be content that research is published in journal articles but unhappy for the same material to be distributed via an open access outlet or blog which has a wider circulation.

The online environment means that research takes place in a range of new contexts. In early Internet research the environment consisted of email, chatrooms, news groups and a variety of largely text based settings. Later Web based environments and more recently participatory Web 2.0 services have introduced new ethical questions and dilemmas. There are good sources of advice for the ethics of online research (for example, Ess and AoIR ethics working group 2002, Eynon et al. 2009, Eynon et al. 2008, and also see Further resources below) but you must remember this is a fast changing field and up-to-date advice might be hard to obtain for new technologies and services.

The current BERA code, published in 2004, only mentions the Internet once, in order to include Internet publications, but it has no specific recommendations for online or Internet research (BERA

2004). However, standard guidance on ethics in educational research should be a starting point because the issues that arise in online research are informed by standard ethical guidance and, increasingly, the distinction between on-line and off-line has become a difficult one to maintain in mediated environments. The Association of Internet Researchers has advice on ethics which, at the time of producing this resource (April 2011), were due to be updated soon.

Online research also involves a degree of interdisciplinarity and it draws on disciplines outside of those traditionally involving human subjects. These different disciplinary traditions often include ethical codes and ethical approaches that take quite different stances on issues such as what is public and what remains private. (Thelwall 2010, Wilkinson and Thelwall 2010)

Public and private

The Internet and Web have altered the boundaries between activities that can be considered private and those that are public. Nothing in recent years has been more central to this than the growth of Social Network Sites (SNS). Is a Twitter stream a document, treatable as text, or is it a discussion? If a Tweet originates in one area but is then re-tweeted out of its original context does it retain the originator's restrictions on its use and re-use or is it simply public?

Twitter is just one of the newer social network services and the issues for one service might not carry over into another. Facebook has its own Terms of Service and the issue of privacy is a contentious one even within the network of Facebook users and between many Facebook users and the originator of Facebook Mark Zuckerberg (Grimmelman 2009, Zimmer 2010).

Ethical approaches to publicly available information must include a consideration of the contextual nature of sharing and users' understandings of privacy. The AoIR ethics guidance applies this broad principle to public areas online (Ess and the AoIR ethics working group, 2002):

"the greater the acknowledged publicity of the venue, the less obligation there may be to protect individual privacy, confidentiality, right to informed consent, etc."

Considerations that apply to that general case include the age of the people in the online space, because minors present particular difficulties with regard to issues such as informed consent. More generally, researchers may need to adopt the stance that the more vulnerable participants are, then the more care should be taken to protect those being researched.

Anonymity and confidentiality

A feature of the Internet is its persistence, searchability and replicability (boyd 2010). In these conditions it may be difficult to promise or to achieve anonymity for a research subject. Even

ensuring confidentiality can be a daunting task. Large scale data can be extracted from a user population but it may prove very difficult to remove all traces that link apparently anonymised data back to individual users (Zimmer 2010). Research using more intensive qualitative data might provide details that include important contextual information that can lead to the identification of the original source.

In qualitative research one way to protect participants is through narrative and creative means, which might require the fictionalising of aspects of the research or the creation of composite accounts, such as in vignettes, providing generalized features based on a number of specific accounts.

Informed consent

The idea of informed consent is central to traditional notions of ethical conduct in research. In online environments this can present difficulties as many environments have a transient and ephemeral quality. Furthermore, Internet environments involve networked publics in which research populations can be difficult to identify, fluctuate and are presented in a disembodied form.

The BERA Ethical Guidelines (2004) state that voluntary informed consent should be given prior to research taking place. However informed consent can be obtained at different points throughout a research project, and in online contexts it might not be possible to obtain consent prior to research taking place. Indeed it might be the case that informed consent cannot reasonably be sought or obtained during a research project. In these cases it might be a better ethical judgment to obtain informed consent when the project is at the point of reporting and the research subject can decide what is acceptable in relation to the way the research is to be reported (e.g. in a case study, in individual quotes, or through vignettes). Informed consent is an aim and it must be the subject of judgments made within particular contexts, applying the general principle sympathetically.

Additionally because of the mediated nature of online research the relationship between the researcher and the participant may be more difficult than in a less mediated face-to-face setting. It may be more difficult to determine whether the participant genuinely understands what they are consenting to, and it also may take more time and explanation to gain consent.

The pace of change

The pace of change makes ethical considerations a key issue for research, but it equally limits the understanding of these issues by ethical committees and bodies providing broad ethical guidance. If a guideline was published prior to 2005, for example, it could not have considered the use of Facebook or the widespread use of Social Network Sites per se.

Currently the use of mobile and handheld devices is blurring the distinction between mobile communications and the Internet and Web. Research can now be conducted in hybrid environments where the mobile phone is both linked to a mobile communications network and the Web. Research can involve research subjects responding to SMS text messages and using handheld devices to collect video and audio data (Jones and Healing 2010). Such data has its own ethical concerns. For example, images collected with informed consent from the provider of the image often include others who have not given their consent and accidental bystanders. Researchers need to consider what responsibilities exist around the use of images and the issues arising from the uncovering of information about a subject/participant accidentally.

At another level of scale universities are becoming interested in the analysis of large data sets using tools such as Google analytics. The ethics of learner analytics (Educause, 2010) are only beginning to emerge as the first international conferences (Athabasca University, 2010) take place to map out the field. A special edition on the subject of learning analytics, for the Journal of Education, Technology, and Society, is planned for 2012.

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Further Resources

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Online resources

The Internet Research Ethics Digital Library, Resource Center and Commons. http://internetresearchethics.org/

The Research Ethics Guidebook: A resource for social scientists. http://www.ethicsguidebook.ac.uk/Online-research-102

E-Research ethics. http://eresearch-ethics.org/about/

Social Science Research Ethics: Web-based research. http://www.lancs.ac.uk/researchethics/7-1-webres.html