



Ethical Issues in Web-based Research

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Key Questions:

- ❖ What constitutes privacy in an online environment?
- ❖ How do we determine “public” and “private” domains?
- ❖ How easy is it to get informed consent?
- ❖ What does informed consent entail in this context?
- ❖ How certain can the researcher be that they can establish the “real” identity of the participants?
- ❖ When is covert research justifiable?

Advantages of web-based research



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What are the advantages of web-based research?

Advantages of web-based research



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- ❖ Access to geographically and culturally diverse population
- ❖ E-mail interactions allow for more clarification of concepts etc than face to face interactions
- ❖ Enables individuals or populations who might not participate in face-to face research to engage in research.

Ethical issues in web-based research



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- ❖ Privacy
- ❖ Anonymity
- ❖ Confidentiality
- ❖ Inclusion of vulnerable or unsuitable populations

Ethical issues in web-based research



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- ❖ Validity and reliability of the data? E.g. is the population skewed in gender/race/geographical distribution?
- ❖ Fluidity of online communities – how to get consent?
- ❖ Inadvertent breach of confidentiality – e.g. shared e-mail accounts/computers – family members accessing e-mails sent to researchers

Employers accessing work e-mail accounts

Ethical issues in web-based research



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- ❖ Informed consent – lack of face to face interaction makes it harder to ascertain whether participants understand
- ❖ Covert research – possibility of debriefing complicated by fluidity of the community



- ❖ Determining the “public” and “private” on the internet
- ❖ Public domains on the internet can be used for private conversations as they are in real life
- ❖ Two ways – 1) Accessibility e.g. un-moderated groups vs. private e-mail groups with requirements for participation
- 2) Expectations – compare scholarly discussions vs. support groups for socially sensitive topics

Using the Web for Data Collection



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- ❖ You are seated on a bench in a public park with a group of close personal friends. Small talk quickly dissipates into issues of a more serious nature.
- ❖ In the course of confiding personal and private issues to your friends, you turn your head to discover someone tape recording the discussion.
- ❖ Outraged you confront this person, who proceeds to explain some ambiguous research project, and attempts to justify the act by citing the public context of your discussion...after all this is a public park. Waskul, D. 1996 Ethics of Online Research: Considerations for the Study of Computer Mediated Forms of Interaction.

Problems for web-based research



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- ❖ Invasion of privacy
- ❖ Not obtaining informed consent – either from author of quotes or for observation
- ❖ Anonymity at risk

Problems for web-based research



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- ❖ How does a researcher cite online text without violating the privacy and confidentiality of the participants?
- ❖ How much description of an online community can be given?



- ❖ Consider
- ❖ What are the technical and administrative rules of the site?
- ❖ What are the rights and responsibilities of members?
- ❖ What are the access restrictions?
- ❖ Are the membership conditions made explicit?



- Support group for e.g. medical condition – expectation may be that only those who understand will read the posts
- ❖ Reaction of member of e-mail discussion group, cited without permission and felt “support group no longer a safe environment for discussion and help”.
 - ❖ Online substance abuse support group – expected privacy levels similar to Alcoholics Anonymous meeting



Consider:

- ❖ Should you do it?
- ❖ Can you do it?
- ❖ From whom do you seek consent? Those that are online?
Those that own the site? Both?



Depends on:

- ❖ The nature of the study
- ❖ The practical implications of obtaining informed consent

How would you get consent in the following examples? Would you not get consent for any of them?

Example 1: Anik wants to study behaviour on online forums

Example 2: Bob wants to do research into politeness. He is going to interact with people in an online forum to see how they react.

Examples



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Example 3: Carl wants to do research into racism in local politics, he will infiltrate a far right online group, and argues it is important for his safety his cover is not blown.

Example 4: Maria wants to do research on suicidal subjects. She proposes to enter forums offering support for suicidal individuals and to use the material as research data.

Example 5: Brian wants to do research on internet paedophile rings by posing as a paedophile.



- ❖ If retaining online pseudonyms can be recognised by the online community
- ❖ Consider the implications of using direct quotations from web postings

- ❖ Within the text remove demographic data
- ❖ Names of people, places and events

researchers collected and analysed text from a cyberspace support group for sexually-abused survivors. The published report did not disclose the names of the participants in the discussion group, but it quoted directly from the text of the participant's cyber-postings and they were, therefore, able to identify themselves. The participants felt violated as a result of this failure to completely anonymise their postings.

(cited in Frankel, M.S and S. Siang. 1999. 'Ethical and Legal Aspects of Human Subjects Research on the Internet: A report of a workshop.'

Using the web for dissemination/data storage



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Consider:

- ❖ Who should be able to view the document?
- ❖ To what extent are “private” domains actually private?
- ❖ Do they meet your requirements and commitments to participants, funders, ethics committee?