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*Insufficient attention has been paid to the practical as well as methodological dimensions of the ethics of online research. Though discussion of research methods for the study of online social phenomena has recently come to the fore, questions concerning the development and implementation of ethical guidelines, the conditions of research, and basic definitions of objects and subjects of study have yet to be fully engaged. This essay maps out some of the terrain of that engagement. It asks questions about the consequences of research, and notes that the Internet is not only technology but a practice that must be situated in the context of life online.*

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Clifford Geertz ends his landmark book, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, with the statement that to study interpretations in a culture "one has only to learn how to gain access to them" (1973, p. 453). Though Geertz was (at least at the time of that book's writing) not "wired," there is something almost cyberpunk or hacker-like about the attitude he expresses. At present for most Internet researchers it is likely that gaining access (be it to newsgroups, listserves, what have you) is the least difficult aspect of the research process. What has become more difficult, as authors of the articles in this issue of the *Iowa Journal of Communication* explain, is determining how to ensure ethical use is made of the texts, sounds, and pictures that are accessed for study.

For communication scholars the advent of each new medium has typically required rethinking of methods and ethics, but the advent of the Internet, or more appropriately its widespread adoption, appears to require additional rethinking of both our object of study and the subjects with whom we engage in our research. The numerous issues Internet researchers have already begun to study, such as gender, access, identity, and community, have implicit within them ethical and political dimensions. Yet few have engaged critical discourse of these dimensions. For example, in a 1998 report titled *Fostering Research on the Economic and Social Impacts of Information Technology* prepared by the Steering Committee on Research Opportunities Relating to Economic and Social Impacts of Computing and Communications, the Computer Science and Telecommunications Board Commission on Physical Sciences, Mathematics, and Applications, and the National Research Council, it was noted that:

"Informed consent" in surveys and experiments is a dimension of privacy that strikes close to home for social science work involving human subjects, but in some ways it is difficult to apply some of

these practices to the Internet. For example, the fact that data is being collected can easily be concealed from subjects. One source of useful data comes from retrospective examination of existing records such as server logs or "Usenet" postings where a social science experiment was not the original intent of the data collection. Just as in the case of private data, cross-tabulation of innocuous data sets can identify seemingly anonymous subjects. Certainly, social scientists must develop a code of practices, ethics, and perhaps regulations that will help deal with these issues. (Fostering Research, 1998)

Within the report ethics plays a very small role, and the printed agenda, position papers and commissioned papers of participants in a 1997 workshop on which the report is based, do not include mention of ethics at all. Similarly, Annette Markham (1998) makes little explicit mention of ethics in her otherwise excellent book about online ethnography. When ethics does come up it is in relation to the scholar's representation of self online and is embedded in the larger context of identity (p.36). Charles Ess's excellent anthology, *Philosophical Perspectives on Computer-Mediated Communication*, contains but few mentions of ethics, most notably in Susan Herring's contribution concerning listserv postings, values and netiquette. Indeed, when ethics has come up in the realm of Internet research, it has largely been tied to matters of netiquette, and few scholars have (at least in their writing) been sufficiently self-critical to engage netiquette as it relates to the research process.

It is only recently that critical discourse about methods for doing Internet research has come to the fore among Internet scholars, and perhaps that is one reason for a lack of substantive published work that tackles ethical dimensions of Internet research. Another reason may be that, as one publisher's representative mentioned to me in a conversation, "ethics in the title (of a book) is the kiss of death" when it comes to sales. Conversely, cyberspace or Internet in the title is the kiss of cash, if you will. Perhaps the combination of ethics and cyberspace will find its way to the top of publishers' lists, though I doubt it. Ethics continues to be a "specialty" area of academic research, and like it or not, academic publishing has increasingly become profit-driven, be it book or journal publishing. It is not hard to only slightly modify the old saw that scholars must "publish or perish" to make it applicable to scholars who have a symbiotic relationship to publishers. But whatever the reason for lack of published critical ethical discourse among Internet scholars, it behooves us to ask (whether we study the Internet or not): what is it that compels us to feel responsible for doing "good work"? When the Net presents us with what seems to be data "prêt-à-porter" what is it that can prevent us from strutting down the runway with it before looking in the mirror?

One thing that is compelling is review of research protocols. But are the procedures, and more importantly, the conceptual frameworks we have up to the task? During the past year I have had, for example, three graduate students spend a good deal of time and effort convincing human subjects review

boards that the research the students wished to pursue (all were studying online social phenomena) should be approved. In two cases neither the review board nor the student was easily able to determine the risk to the human subjects to be studied, appropriate methods for obtaining consent, and appropriate ways to ensure anonymity. In one case it was difficult to determine whether human subjects were in fact being studied, since the research involved explorations of online interactions that may have involved bots.

In one of the few substantive treatments of ethics in cyberspace, an issue of *The Information Society*, guest-edited by Jim Thomas, Kling (1996) rightly observes that "the conditions of research and the tailoring of (human subjects research) guidelines vary from one field to another" (p. 103). Scholars of communication have long struggled with ethical issues involving risk to human subjects, as have communication professionals. Christians, Rutzell and Fackler (1987) point out a question that must be asked by all involved in the study and reporting of information: "To whom is moral duty owed?" (p. 17).

The answer to that question depends, to some degree at least, on how we define, in language as well as in concept, the object of study. Boehlefeld rightly notes "that people are the real source of our data" (p. 151), a fact easily overlooked by the ease of access to CMC texts noted earlier. It is important to keep in mind the distinction between "subject" and "participant" that Waskul and Douglas (1996) make. Most online research (and interaction) is concerned with participation, rather than experimentation or treatments that would make us consider online actors "subjects." Much, if not most, research into online social phenomena is also heavily indebted to ethnographic methods, and if we are to not bankrupt those methods we must understand that those online participants in cultures of their own making. Mark Slouka (1995) reminds us that the more "virtual" we become the more difficult it is to understand the real consequences of our actions on others. Those we study are no more "subjects" than the online texts they create are "mere messages." One risk, then, to be avoided, is the diminishing of the human element online. Participants in online communication, virtual worlds, cyberspace, and so on, are not to be subsumed by the texts they create, they are not to be rendered wholly disembodied, they should not be considered somehow not human or valueless because they are "virtual."

Additionally, Kling's observation should prompt us to ask two questions: when it comes to Internet research, is there a "field" that can provide guidelines? Second, what are "the conditions of research" when it comes to studying the Internet?

In answer to the first question, I believe a field is emerging: we might call "Internet Studies." At present its outlines are vague indeed, and they may remain so for quite some time, which is likely for the better as blurred boundaries will allow for a mix of disciplines to contribute to an amalgam of social science and humanistic approaches to studying online social phenomena. Study of the Internet belongs to no one department, discipline, or set of theories or methods. Indeed, as Hakken points out, Internet research is a striking

example of overlap between academic research and what he terms "practice-related" research that is done by "cyberspace ethnographers. . . employed by corporations" (1999, p.209). One useful approach to developing ethical guidelines for the study of online social phenomena, therefore, is to examine guidelines in other areas of inquiry. Development of new scholarly associations such as the association (of) internet researchers (<http://aoir.org>) points to eventual development of ethical codes that might guide Internet studies.

It is important that research on Internet-specific technologies and experiences be informed by a longer tradition of research on network technologies generally, one that has amassed an important body of literature and tackled some thorny ethical issues (Williams, Rice & Rogers, 1988). In the realm of new media like the Internet, we will no doubt find of use the ethical approaches developed for the study of media before Internet networking. Bochlefeld (1966), for example, mines the ethical guidelines of the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) for valuable insight into the conduct of ethical research on the Internet. But the ACM's guidelines cannot, to borrow from the language of computer programming, be easily "ported" to the breadth of theories, methods and approaches that social scientists and humanists bring to Internet studies. The very language the ACM uses in its guidelines, words like "personal privacy" and "personal dignity" are, while in some sense inherently valuable, particularly necessary to scrutinize and define to the degree that their value seems inherent.

Indeed, it is the notion of value that we must most closely interrogate. Ethics are not our only concern then, but so are legal matters. One admittedly vulgar way to draw a line between ethical and legal concerns is to determine whether one is concerned with values or value, that is, with human or financial issues. For example, a rather common attitude is that the material posted on newsgroups, listserves, chat spaces, etc., is somehow all in the public sphere. But it is not, if only for reasons of copyright. We should be aware of the need to attend to long-standing legal principles of copyright, and we are likely to be made aware in cases of egregious copyright violation. But we also should be aware of standards for citation, for acknowledging the work of others.

The law alone, however, is insufficient, but not only because it tends to de-emphasize moral values. If we must have the law and only the law to guide us, our work as scholars will be ever subject to what Carey (in another context) described as: "the province of layers, a nest of juridically derived meanings, an instrument to adjust and avoid disputes, to advance and promote interests, to protect and enhance rights" (1997, p. 208). Instead, we must continue the narrative expressed, created and re-created in this issue of the *Iowa Journal of Communication* and in other venues for scholarly dialogue to best give shape to the moral imperatives of Internet study.

Among those imperatives is the need to consider the inequality of cyberspace, of access to the Internet, knowledge of computers, operating systems, keyboarding, and so on. Kling's second observation concerning sensitivity to the conditions of research thus has special meaning when it comes to study of

the Internet. There is something peculiar about the conditions of Internet research that should direct scholarly attention, as it has directed that of the public, industry and government, toward matters of access, equity, identity and privacy. These issues comprise a two-way street. If we rely on the Internet to easily bring us data, or to bring us to data, we should also be wary of the ease with which data is brought to us. If we have access to online worlds, we must not assume others have similar (or any) access. William, Rice and Rogers (1988) warn:

Because of computers and telecommunications networks, some media can be considered "new" at this time. (But) because of the rights and integrity of humans, ethics and privacy will continue to be complex and crucial issues for many years to come. Communication scholars should . . . explore how the new media may be part of a more ethical and liberating world. Researchers of new media should explore their theories, research designs, and methods to uncover assumptions about the new media that either ignore or even encourage . . . possible (negative) social conditions. (p. 186)

The demand for political engagement is explicit and important for both academia and the larger world. As I have been regularly asking at any opportunity to address an academic audience, will Internet research result in increasingly interdisciplinary work as scholars realize the opportunities and benefits brought about by their own "networking" to study networked technologies? What are the long-term implications of doing Internet research for one's career? Do opportunities exist for publication in journals and books? Are there mentors in academia who can assist new faculty? Might scholars find new opportunities for funding and be lured toward industry jobs? Might they be envied – and even disdained – by those who believe scholars pursuing Internet research are opportunistic? Will scholars doing Internet research play a role as "public intellectuals," participating in the on-going debates regarding the Internet and society, ethics and policy, or will they be left out of such discussions? And, importantly, is Internet research a passing fad or a lasting area of inquiry?

It is important that scholars studying online phenomena be self-critical. What are the institutional dimensions of academic Internet research, and how might they be related to the histories of particular disciplines and those disciplines' engagements and familiarity with ethics? What might be the connections between academia and industry that may cause ethical dilemmas? How might we identify audiences for Internet research, and what does such identification mean for our work (and what does it say about our ability to imagine who we think we are)? To put it most broadly: in what ways will the timbre of ethical considerations be affected at the points of contact between scholars and others? As my good friend and colleague, Joli Jensen, continually exhorts, we should continually ask of ourselves what it is that we are up to.

Network technologies entangle subject, object, and scholar. We must not forget that it is desirable to apply critical theory to our own work, e.g., by asking: when does participant observation become participant surveillance? Does tele-presence alter the fundamental role that presence plays in our considerations of ethical matters? Where does one locate the self as a scholar of online phenomena?

It is natural that identity and ethics are linked, but the reason for that linkage, the reason for that linkage's strength in Internet studies, must be better understood. The issue is not solely whether one is being truthful or deceptive. It is important to determine the depth of consequences associated with online behavior and research. Of course, no matter whether the object of our study be virtual or real, the consequences to both scholar and research subject can feel very real indeed. But in what ways are consequences persistent in real and virtual worlds? What are the consequences of doing research on or in network technologies, for us as scholars and for subjects of our inquiries? Until we better understand the nature of life online we will have a difficult time answering those questions. We must acknowledge the consequential and political dimension of Internet studies, be that in relation to policy, censorship, access, privacy, or any number of other important issues, lest we lose contact with the Internet as a practicing (social, economic, political) and not just a technology. Online actors may seem disembodied, delocalized, etc., but they/we are not. The Internet does not exist apart from life offline, and therefore the sensitivities we bring to our research and our everyday lives should also guide our efforts at study of new and emergent cultures, be they real or virtual.

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