Chapter I

Virtual Research Ethics: A Content Analysis of Surveys and Experiments Online

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a content analysis of Internet surveys and experiments. Our study explores guidelines for the conduct of online research by describing the extent to which psychological studies comply with Reips' (2000) recommendations for Web researchers. Our study also explores ethical considerations and problems in the conduct of virtual research by describing the extent to which behavioral studies on the Internet comply with ethical standards for research (American Psychological Association, 2003). The chapter concludes with a discussion of aspects of virtual research ethics pertinent to future participants, Internet scientists and Institutional Review Boards.

"We need not invent new ethical rules for online research. We need only increase our awareness of and commitment to established ethical principles."

– Jim Thomas, 1999, p. 8

INTRODUCTION

This chapter reports on a content analysis of psychological research on the Internet. Our interest in studying how psychologists do surveys and experiments online derives from a professional involvement in both research and ethics. In the late 1990s, we became intrigued by other psychologists' use of the Internet as a tool for conducting research. At first we served as participants in some online surveys and experiments. Later we explored ways to implement our own research on the Web by talking to information technologists and by reading the scattered literature on Internet science.

Our experience as participants raised initial questions and concerns about virtual research ethics. For example, we participated in online studies that differed with respect to inducements for research participation. Although some researchers paid all their participants and others employed a lottery or random drawing for monetary prizes, many Internet scientists provided no inducements other than an opportunity for the participants to contribute to science. A discussion with Institutional Review Board (IRB) members initially revealed a genuine quandary about how participants, who should remain anonymous, could be paid. The IRB members also raised eyebrows when we asked about how students in the Psychology Department subject pool could receive credit for participating in online research.

Our experience with information technologists prompted further questions and concerns about virtual research ethics. The individuals who were helping us implement our own studies on the Internet did not understand our concerns about informed consent and debriefing. In fact, they often seemed to regard these pages as blemishes on the face of an otherwise attractive website.

While we were participating in online studies and exploring how to implement our own surveys and experiments, we began to search the literature. We quickly learned that relevant articles appeared in rather diverse and scattered sources. We also learned that many articles about psychological research on the Internet focused on methodological issues. Nonetheless, we detected an emerging awareness and interest in virtual research ethics, the topic of this volume.

Our contribution to this volume is empirical and analytical. First, we provide the rationale and method for our content analysis of Internet surveys and experiments conducted by psychologists in the early months of 2002. Our study explores guidelines for the conduct of online research, a goal of this volume, by describing the extent to which psychological studies comply with Reips' (2000) recommendations for Web researchers. Our study also explores ethical considerations and problems in the conduct of virtual research, another goal of this volume, by describing the extent to which behavioral studies on the Internet comply with ethical standards for research (American Psychological Association (APA), 2003). Second, we analyze and interpret specific findings in terms of recent comments and developments in the current literature on Internet science. Finally, we discuss the more general aspects of virtual research ethics pertinent to future participants, Internet scientists and IRBs.

BACKGROUND

What a difference a decade makes in terms of technology and behavior in cyberspace. In the early 1990s, the Internet was virtually unknown to the general public and the

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