
Chapter XII

Co-Construction and Field Creation: Website Development as both an Instrument and Relationship in Action Research

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ABSTRACT

Ethnographic research ethics involved in bridging offline and online modes of action research are the focal point of this chapter, written from an anthropological perspective. The specific form of action research in this case study is that of website development. The author argues that online action research, and Web development as a research tool and relationship in ethnographic research are still very much neglected areas of concern, with respect to both virtual ethnography and traditional forms of field work. In this chapter, the argument put forth is that while traditional offline research ethics

are still applicable, especially in the offline dimension of research that precedes collaborative Web development, online modes of action research involve substantively different and more fluid conceptions of research ethics, rights and responsibilities for all parties concerned.

INTRODUCTION

Anthropologists are still in the process of determining whether or not ethnographies of Internet users raise new ethical questions or issues for researcher conduct. Publications in the Annual Review of Anthropology, intended as reflections of the “state of the art” with respect to particular fields of anthropological research and as a means of outlining future research directions, have paid scant attention to the question of ethics in Internet research (e.g., Wilson & Peterson, 2002). This is not a neglect that is confined to the work of Wilson and Peterson either, as they note: “the American Anthropological Association offers no ethical protocols or standards specific to online interactions in its Code of Ethics” (Wilson & Peterson, 2002, p. 461). What Wilson and Peterson (2002, pp. 461, 456) do argue is that the online world is embedded in the offline world from which it emerged, and is subject to its rules and norms, including codes of ethics developed in standard research settings. This basic corpus of ethical practices that applies just as much online as offline, according to the authors, are those outlined in the American Anthropological Association’s (AAA) “Code of Ethics”:

“A (2) Anthropological researchers must do everything in their power to ensure that their research does not harm the safety, dignity, or privacy of the people with whom they work, conduct research, or perform other professional activities. ... A (3) Anthropological researchers must determine in advance whether their hosts/providers of information wish to remain anonymous or receive recognition, and make every effort to comply with those wishes. Researchers must present to their research participants the possible impacts of the choices, and make clear that despite their best efforts, anonymity may be compromised or recognition fail to materialize. ... A (4) Anthropological researchers should obtain in advance the informed consent of persons being studied, providing information, owning or controlling access to material being studied, or otherwise identified as having interests which might be impacted by the research. ... the informed consent process is dynamic and continuous; the process should be initiated in the project design and continue through implementation by way of dialogue and negotiation with those studied. ... Informed consent, for the purposes of this code, does not necessarily imply or require a particular written or signed form. It is the quality of the consent, not the format, which is relevant” (AAA, 1998).

Essentially then, the primary ethical concerns reduce to norms that can be summarized as: no harm, anonymity (if desired) and consent.

What makes this issue suddenly more problematic and unclear is when other researchers (let me call them “the dissenters” for lack of a better term) take quite a different slant from the school of thought represented by Wilson and Peterson (let me call them “the conservatives”), and I count myself amongst the dissenters. The dissenters would not argue that basic research ethics, traditionally developed in offline research settings,

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