
Chapter XIII

What If You Meet Face to Face? A Case Study in Virtual/Material Research Ethics

David Clark
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, USA

ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the author argues for a strict interpretation of research ethics when conducting online research, and in the process, discusses these four ethical categories: the presence of the researcher in the researched context, the blurring lines between “public” and “private,” informed consent and confidentiality. In making his argument, he draws on examples from a case study in which he examined an organization that meets both online and face-to-face.

INTRODUCTION

Internet researchers have long struggled with the complexities of applying research ethics and methods based in material, face-to-face research to virtual research (Jones, 1994). In fact, scholars have widely asserted (if not widely agreed) that ethical models

founded on face-to-face research are inadequate for the study of online communities, where among other difficulties the researcher must confront the following:

- **Researcher presence:** a renewed struggle with research effect because of the possibilities of “lurking” (cf. Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR), 2001; Frankel & Siang, 1999);
- **Public vs. private:** blurring lines between public and private (cf. Gurak & Silker, 1997; Frankel & Siang, 1999);
- **Informed consent:** complications in obtaining informed consent (cf. Reid, 1996; Bruckman, 2002) and
- **Confidentiality, risk and reciprocity:** old problems—risks and reciprocity—compounded by new difficulties in maintaining confidentiality in the digital realm (cf. Clarke, 2000; AoIR, 2001).

These are problems that cut across disciplines, and it is not difficult to find scholarship on Internet research from many diverse fields: psychology, sociology, library/information science, computer science and technical and professional writing. What all this work shares in common is a spectrum of ethical stances, varying from those with highly restrictive ethical views to those Charles Ess calls “deontological” (“[those] inclined to override subjects’ protections in the name of research goals and its ostensible benefits,” quoted in Suler, 2000). Another commonality is that scholars almost uniformly assert that Internet research requires new ethical structures (whether stricter or less strict) that acknowledge the new complexities inherent in virtual research. After all, many Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) are not up to date on the complexities of Internet research, and there is an anxiety in the Internet ethics literature that it is all too easy for researchers to take a position of “what can I get away with?” instead of dealing substantively with ethical issues. As a result, many organizations have stepped in to develop preliminary but thorough ethics codes, including the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) and the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

The Internet research ethics scholarship is still relatively young. It is still in the stage where a literature search turns up many, many articles making claims that are nearly identical rather than discipline specific. And there is little to no research on the complexities introduced by researching a context that is both virtual and material, such as my own work of a community that meets both online and in person. Research in a jointly virtual and material context raises unique questions. For example, the primary texts in my research are the community’s listserv postings; how will participant perceptions of risk be impacted by physical meetings with me and others after I have written potentially critical things? Postings that seemed innocuous at the time could become a source of embarrassment. How can I best protect anonymity and confidentiality in an online community where participants actually know one another in person? How can I balance the private nature of group meetings (which no one would dream of studying without consent) with the apparently public nature of the listserv, which participants, along with many researchers, treat as free for public use? How should I manage informed consent?

As a first attempt at answering such questions as these, in this chapter I draw on my own virtual/material research project in attempting to explore what a joint virtual/material research ethics might look like. Why aren’t virtual/material research ethics

14 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage: www.igi-global.com/chapter/you-meet-face-face-case/28302

Related Content

Addressing Team Dynamics in Virtual Teams: The Role of Soft Systems

Frank Stowell and Shavindrie Cooray (2016). *International Journal of Information Technologies and Systems Approach* (pp. 32-53).

www.irma-international.org/article/addressing-team-dynamics-in-virtual-teams/144306

Qualitative Research in Information Systems: An Exploration of Methods

M. Gordon Hunter (2004). *The Handbook of Information Systems Research* (pp. 291-304).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/qualitative-research-information-systems/30354

An Innovative Approach to the Development of an International Software Process Lifecycle Standard for Very Small Entities

Rory V. O'Connor and Claude Y. Laporte (2014). *International Journal of Information Technologies and Systems Approach* (pp. 1-22).

www.irma-international.org/article/an-innovative-approach-to-the-development-of-an-international-software-process-lifecycle-standard-for-very-small-entities/109087

On the Study of Complexity in Information Systems

James Courtney, Yasmin Merali, David Paradice and Eleanor Wynn (2008). *International Journal of Information Technologies and Systems Approach* (pp. 37-48).

www.irma-international.org/article/study-complexity-information-systems/2532

The So.Re.Com. "A.S. de Rosa" @-library for Documentation, Networking, and Training

Annamaria Silvana de Rosa (2015). *Encyclopedia of Information Science and Technology, Third Edition* (pp. 4938-4949).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/the-sorecom-as-de-rosa--library-for-documentation-networking-and-training/112941