
Chapter XVI

Virtual Youth Research: An Exploration of Methodologies and Ethical Dilemmas from a British Perspective

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ABSTRACT

By presenting findings from research into British online youth culture conducted by the author, the chapter critically evaluates how to study adolescents' use of the Internet and the ethical considerations facing the researcher. The methodologies applied include data collection with the help of Web server logs, online surveys, e-mail interviews, participant observation in online communities, as well as a "technobiography" of the author designing her own teenage website. Ethical problems discussed in the chapter deal with access to virtual sites of research, parental and informed consent, the role of the researcher, ownership of online data and issues of confidentiality.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid transformation of the Internet into a more commercial and consumer-oriented technology has opened up many gaps in our knowledge of how young people use online information and Web-based services. Recent research has begun to investigate these gaps (e.g., Tobin, 1998; Livingstone, 2001; Sandvig, 2001), though there are only a few publications applying online methodologies to study adolescents (e.g., Chandler & Roberts-Young, 1998; Tapscott, 1998). Researching this age group, in either the offline or online environment, calls for special care to be taken by the researcher. Yet still fewer publications deal with the ethical issues of collecting data about young people on the Internet (e.g., Abbott, 1998; Gaunlett, 2002b; Smyres, 1999).

In the last two decades, sociologists have tried to set up ethical guidelines for traditional child and youth research conducted in an offline environment (see Morrow & Richards, 1996). These revolve around access to the site of research, parental consent, power relationships between the researcher and the child, as well as issues of confidentiality and privacy. However, it is questionable whether these guidelines are applicable in a virtual context. Other researchers have already questioned the online usability of traditional ethical research codes that focus on adult subjects (see Frankel & Siang, 1999; Jones, 1994; Ward, 1999).

As Internet research progressively develops into a major field of academic inquiry and children as well as young people¹ are likely to become the subjects of online studies, as they constitute “the Internet users of the future,” a discussion on the ethical issues regarding such research is required.

As a contribution to this evolving field, I will present one case study of online research in action, critically evaluating my experiences of investigating young people’s use of the Internet. The research forms part of my work on the role of the Internet in contemporary British youth culture.

Such a discussion is less effective without an understanding of online methods and their implications for research involving young human subjects. Thus, I will illustrate the methodologies I applied to the online study of youth culture on a range of different virtual field sites, identifying problems and advantages in relation to traditional face-to-face methodologies.

Conducting research in a new field of study, such as the Internet, has its particular difficulties. Many areas still remain unexplored and there are no clear-cut guidelines for gathering data. A “hybrid approach” (see Sterne, 1999) has emerged, combining a range of methodologies and sites, of which the online aspects will be explored here. In particular, these include:

- interviewing producers of teen websites via e-mail,
- conducting an (informal) e-mail survey of young home page authors,
- designing a teen site, including a Web-based survey,
- conducting a participant observation in a teen online community, and
- collecting Web server data on young people’s Internet use.

Before turning to virtual research, I studied young people’s Internet use with traditional methods, conducting a paper survey of secondary school children in the

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