

Chapter 32

Ethical Considerations in Online Research Methods

Harsh Suri

The University of Melbourne, Australia

Fay Patel

Dalhousie University, Canada

ABSTRACT

Online research methods are gaining popularity in several disciplines as they offer numerous opportunities that were not feasible before. However, online research methods also present many challenges and complexities that give rise to ethical dilemmas for online researchers and research participants. This chapter discusses key ethical considerations in the four stages of the research process: research design, online data collection methods, data analysis methods, and online communication of research outcomes. Issues of power, voice, identity, representation, and anonymity in online research are discussed. The relationship between information and power and its implications for equity in online research is also examined. Rather than providing prescriptive recommendations, the authors use questioning as a strategic device to foster critical awareness and ethically informed decision-making among online researchers.

INTRODUCTION

Highlighting the potential social and economic impact of new media technologies globally, early advocates (Lerner, 1958; Rogers, 1962; McLuhan, 1962) recommended them as highly desirable for promoting modernity and prosperity between the 1960s and 1980s. Since the advent of the Internet as a new media technology, online access to information has been regarded as a necessary and fast way to connect global societies (Rogers, 1995). Commonly held beliefs are that new media makes global communication more accessible, supports gender neutrality, has innovative appeal, encourages rapid response rates, provides access to new and old information sources and facilitates collaborative construction of knowledge. However, these beliefs have been challenged over time and it appears that issues of access, gender neutrality, social justice, equity and intellectual property are among a wide range of contested issues across disciplinary perspectives (Mowlana, 1995; McMichael, 2005; Gurumurthy, 2004; Palomba, 2006).

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Online research is relatively young with a life of about twenty years since the Internet became a primary and important source of information generation, retrieval, communication and dissemination. After being part of the ARPANET network that was solely used for military purposes in the United States in the early part of the twentieth century, the Internet was introduced first to the libraries and legal practitioners and later to the higher educational institutions. However, the pace of development of protocols for online usage of information by researchers has been relatively slow when compared with the rapid development, diversification and acceptance of the new media. This has contributed to a series of loose and ambiguous norms of engagement and protocols across different regions of the world (Rogers, 1995).

Online research methods refer to methods of designing research, collecting data, analysing data and communicating research outcomes using one or more online technologies which facilitate synchronous or asynchronous communication, presentation or co-construction of information. These technologies include emails, electronic surveys, online interviews, online discussions, web-pages, blogs, wikis and various gaming and social networking tools. *Ethics* refers to the principles, beliefs and values that espouse fairness, goodness, integrity and honesty. Research ethics and methods are intricately entwined as Markham (2007, p. 7) emphasises “that all methods decisions are in actuality ethics decisions and that all ethics decisions are in actuality methods decisions”.

Ethical issues in research have remained the key focal point of validation of research for centuries and the literature is exhaustive with respect to ethical considerations in traditional face-to-face research. Ethical considerations become even more important in online research because of the elusive nature of virtual communication, the unclear boundaries of the virtual reality and the socio-cultural, political and economic factors that drive the everyday reality of research participants. It is therefore necessary to educate and inform online researchers on the pitfalls of online research and to alert them to their ethical obligations as researchers.

While the new media technologies present numerous opportunities and challenges for an online researcher, some challenges have parallels in face-to-face research and others are unique to online research. The online researcher must not only consider ethics in designing, conducting and evaluating online research methods, but also consider how research participants are assigned or denied identities, ascribed or denied their voice, and so on. Within this context, issues considered in this chapter include:

- research questions that are suitable for online research;
- influences from multiple stakeholders on the kinds of research questions to be considered;
- access to online technologies and how access affects participation levels;
- dialectical tensions between offline and online representations and identities of the researcher and the researched;
- confidentiality and anonymity in online data analysis;
- engaging the broad diversity of global communities in an effort to ensure that online research is inclusive; and
- how various stakeholders influence, and are influenced by, online presentation of research outcomes.

Most researchers are guided by their institutional review boards to ensure ethical conduct of research. For instance, Australian researchers are guided by the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* developed jointly by the National Health and Medical Research Council, Australian Research Council and Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee (NHMRC, ARC, & AVCC, 2007). We will draw

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