Chapter II

Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research: Recommendations from the AoIR Ethics Working Committee[1]*

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ABSTRACT

The AoIR ethics statement, developed by ethicists and researchers from 11 countries, articulates guiding questions for online research appropriate to the many disciplines—both within the social sciences and the humanities—that undertake such research. These guidelines are characterized by an ethical pluralism—one that acknowledges the legitimacy of a range of possible ethical responses to a given problem, especially as viewed from the perspectives of the diverse national and cultural traditions represented on the Web and the Net as global media. This is an excerpt of the full working document available at http://www.aoir.org/reports/ethics.pdf.

PROLOGUE

The Internet has opened up a wide range of new ways to examine human actions and/or interactions (inter/actions[2]) in new contexts, and from a variety of disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches. As in its offline counterpart, online research also raises critical issues of risk and safety to the human subject. Hence, online researchers may encounter conflicts between the requirements of research and its possible benefits, on the one hand, and human subjects' rights to and expectations of autonomy, privacy, informed consent, etc., on the other hand.

The many disciplines already long engaged in human subject research (sociology, anthropology, psychology, medicine, communication studies, etc.[3]) have established ethics statements intended to guide researchers and those charged with ensuring that research on human subjects follows both legal requirements and ethical practices. (At United States colleges and universities, these are characteristically called Institutional Review Boards or IRBs.) Researchers and those charged with research oversight are encouraged in the first instance to turn to the discipline-specific principles and practices of research (many of which are listed in Resources).

But as online research takes place in a range of new venues (e-mail, chatrooms, Web pages, various forms of "instant messaging," MUDs and MOOs, USENET newsgroups, audio/video exchanges, etc.)—researchers, research subjects and those charged with research oversight will often encounter ethical questions and dilemmas that are not directly addressed in extant statements and guidelines. In addition, both the great variety of human inter/actions observable online and the clear need to study these inter/actions in interdisciplinary ways have thus engaged researchers and scholars in disciplines beyond those traditionally involved in human subject research. For example, researching the multiple uses of texts and graphics images in diverse Internet venues often benefits from approaches drawn from art history, literary studies, etc. This interdisciplinary approach to research leads, however, to a central ethical difficulty: The primary assumptions and guiding metaphors and analogies—and thus the resulting ethical codes—can vary sharply from discipline to discipline, especially as we shift from the social sciences (which tend to rely on medical models and law for human subject's protection) to the humanities (which stress the agency and publicity of persons as artists and authors).

This array of ethical issues and possible (and sometimes conflicting) approaches to ethical decision making are daunting, if not overwhelming. Nonetheless, as we have worked through a wide range of issues, case studies and pertinent literature, we are convinced that it is possible—up to a point, at least—to clarify and resolve at least many of the more common ethical difficulties.

This chapter—as it synthesizes the results of our nearly two years of work together—is intended to aid both researchers from a variety of disciplines and those responsible for insuring that this research adheres to legal and ethical requirements during their work of clarifying and resolving ethical issues encountered in online research.

This chapter stresses:

Ethical Pluralism

Ethical concerns arise not only when we encounter apparent conflicts in values and interests—but also when we recognize that there is more than one ethical decision-

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