Chapter III

Ethics in Internet Ethnography

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ABSTRACT

Doing research and collecting data online is not the same as offline. This chapter discusses the wide range of possible ethical conflicts we are confronted with when we do Internet research, as well as how and in which cases existing ethical guidelines may be difficult to apply when our research field is online. It is also discusses how research ethics may be reconsidered: how we may think about, reason and make decisions when doing ethnographic Internet research. Above all, it illustrates the importance of reflecting and being conscious of our role as researchers and about the consequences that our research may have.

INTRODUCTION

The new environments that we find on the Internet have come to pose a number of questions and challenges. Not only have we been faced with new ways of looking at community and communication, we have also had to reconsider questions on how to do research on such phenomena. Notably, Internet research has actualized issues of research ethics. Research ethics on the Internet might mean several things. In this

chapter, however, the focus will be on questions of what is ethically appropriate to do when research involves human subjects.

An increasing number of scholars are conducting research on phenomena referred to as Internet culture. The Internet communities that have evolved as cultures encourages the use of ethnographic method, and a growing number of articles within the field of Internet culture also address issues of what is known as online ethnography (e.g., Paccagnella, 1997) or virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000).

Within ethnographic research, issues of culture are central. The notion of culture has been defined in several ways (see, for example, Storey, 1993), but within ethnographically-oriented studies, researchers typically regard culture from a comprehensive view. They define culture as a specific way to live ("a whole way of life"), whether it is an ethnic group, a group in society or an organization that is under study. The assumption that guides ethnographic research is that each group of people who spend time together will create ways of organizing and making sense of the world. With culture, we then mean the mutual understandings and patterns of behaviors that structure the group's culture, or way of living. As a way to grasp the culture of a group, ethnographic research means studying members' thoughts and conceptions of the world, norms and values, as well as the practices that are attached to them (Sveningsson, Lövheim, & Bergquist, 2003).

As Sveningsson et al. (2003) acknowledge, ethnography should not really be seen as one method, but rather an approach, which often involves a combination of a variety of methods. However, the most widely used and with which the term ethnography is sometimes even used interchangeably is participant observation. Participant observation is often combined with other methods, for example, interviews. In its most characteristic form, ethnography means that researchers participate, openly or hidden, in people's daily life for an extended period of time (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). They observe what happens in the environment; they listen to what is said and they ask questions. Through the interaction with people and the participation in their activities, they learn about the local world with its traditions and value systems. The ethnographic researcher is concerned with notions, such as realism and subjectivity, and studies natural environments, as opposed to constructed experimental settings. The goal is to describe the environment under study in a way that corresponds to what it normally looks like. For ethnographic researchers, it is important to get rich material, and as a result the descriptions of environments are often referred to as "thick" (Geertz, 1973).

Within ethnographic research, the ideal for a long time was for the participant observer to be able to see, hear and document everything that happened without being noticed, or at least without people knowing that they were observed by a researcher. This thought was based on the ideal of the researcher being as neutral and unbiased as possible and on the challenges this was perceived to imply. A researcher who chooses to participate will inevitably influence the environment simply by being part of it. By actively contributing in shaping the social situation, s/he will actually come to take part in the shaping of the culture of the group that is under study. It is not only through participating that the researcher risks influencing the environment. The mere presence of an observer may affect the situation and the people that are under study. For a long time, this was seen as a dilemma in ethnographic research. Since the ambition was to study groups and cultures in their natural state, many researchers were occupied with what could be done in order to minimize their influence. For example, specific interview

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