
Chapter VIII

Organizational Research Over the Internet: Ethical Challenges and Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a framework through which ethical Internet-based organizational research can be conducted. Organizational constraints that promote the use of the Internet for applied research are identified, followed by potential benefits and drawbacks. The chapter then discusses the ethical issues that must be considered when conducting Internet-based organizational research; these include concerns about privacy, confidentiality, anonymity, informed consent and providing a debriefing. A case study illustrates these issues, and the chapter concludes with directions for future research. Numerous tables and figures are used to serve as a quick reference for the key points of the chapter.

INTRODUCTION

The Internet and the World Wide Web (WWW) have affected nearly every aspect of our everyday lives. It has spawned a new method of communicating and expressing oneself, whether it is an individual, a group of individuals or an organization. It should therefore come as no surprise that the Internet has also become a growing and increasingly important medium for conducting research. There are many reasons for this, but perhaps the most important ones are the Internet's use as a more effective and efficient research tool over traditional methods, such as face-to-face or paper-and-pencil research methods.

One area where the Internet could dramatically improve research methodology is in the domain of organizational research. Organizational research is a broad domain that is concerned with studying the behavior and activities of organizations, which includes the employees, shareholders and customers of these organizations. When conducting applied research in organizations, the Internet offers many advantages over traditional methods, such as a greater ability to reach geographically dispersed samples that may work at different times (e.g., day or night), lowering costs (no proctor present, no paper, etc.), reducing missing or erroneous data and reducing the time from data collection to data analysis (e.g., Baron & Austin, 2000; Smith & Leigh, 1997; Mehta & Sivadas, 1995; Sproull, 1986; Yost & Homer, 1998). Given that many organizations operate or cooperate with branch offices in multiple states and, even, countries, the savings in terms of time, paper and mail costs can be substantial for Internet assessments (Church, 2001). As we discuss below, two of the biggest factors limiting organizations when conducting research are time and money. The potential advantages of Web-based data collection, thus make organizational research more frequent and potentially useful.

Although use of the Internet in conducting organizational research is becoming more popular, one issue that has been largely neglected is the new and different ethical concerns. Clearly they are at the forefront of any research enterprise, and there are many guidelines for ensuring ethical standards in research. However, problems arise when a methodology for conducting research is so novel that there are no universally accepted standards or guidelines for its ethical use. The Internet has been around more than 20 years; organizational researchers have been conducting research over the Internet for more than 10 of those years, and yet there is still no common standard researchers use to assess whether their study is ethically sound. For example, the "Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association" (American Psychological Association (APA), 2001) includes a chapter on ethical behavior in research, but has no reference to Web-based research. Likewise the "Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing" (APA, 1999) and the "Ethical Principles In the Conduct of Research with Human Participants" (APA, 1982) have no specific focus, suggestions or guidelines for conducting Web-based research or testing.

Unfortunately, conducting ethical research in organizations is often difficult, because organizations are constrained by money, time and resources. As will be discussed, the Internet offers many benefits over traditional research methods for conducting organizational research, but also raises new ethical issues not previously encountered. For example, ensuring participant anonymity (and perceptions of anonymity) can be difficult with Web-based data collection. As many employers consider any information sent over the company's computers to be the property of the organization,

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