
Chapter XVIII

User-Centered Internet Research: The Ethical Challenge

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ABSTRACT

The current model of research ethics assumes an investigator, who holds expert status and superior knowledge, and a subject in a passive role. This model is meeting increasing resistance from subjects on the Internet. A collaborative model that recognizes the contribution of both researcher and subject is necessary for both practical and ethical reasons. We argue in this chapter that the history of the ethics and politics of research offers insight into our present situation and its dilemmas.

TWO MODELS OF ETHICS

The ethics of online research has received a great deal of attention from scholars in a variety of disciplines of late. The Internet is increasingly popular as a research site and it poses unique technological and methodological challenges. This has led to a

renewal of the traditional themes of research ethics, such as the right of human subjects to give or withhold informed consent, protection of privacy and similar issues (see Ess, *in press*; Frankel & Siang, 1999; Thomas, 1996). Yet the ethical issues facing Internet researchers also involve some rather different problems that have not been addressed. We argue in this chapter that the history of the ethics and politics of research offers insight into our present situation and its dilemmas.

Research ethics originated from the concerns that surrounded the study of human subjects after the ghastly Nazi experiments in World War II. Following the war, public funding for research involving human subjects reached unprecedented levels, raising the issue of accountability to prominence ("Preface," 1969, p. v). Despite this early attention, it was not until the late 1960s that experimentation on human subjects drew widespread scholarly interest.

There are a number of similarities between the ethical issues that were discussed at that time and those faced by online researchers today. Both discussions identify the same actors as integral to ethical research procedures: the researcher, the participant, society at large, regulatory bodies (i.e., ethics committees, government, etc.) and publishing personnel all prove to be important to the process. Regulating the relationships among these diverse actors emerges as the ultimate mission of research ethics. However, opinions on how to fulfill this mission differ significantly depending on the analysis of the relationships among actors. Interestingly, sensitivity to the importance of this initial analysis seems to have been higher in the early debates. Contemporary accounts tend to assume a standard and unquestioned set of relations. To better understand this difference, it is helpful to review Freund's (1969) two models of research ethics.

In his introduction to a formative discussion of the ethics of experimentation with human subjects, published as a special issue of *Daedalus* (Freund, 1969), Freund distinguishes the "fiduciary" (p. ix), or law-model, from the "sociological model" (p. viii) as two distinct types of research ethics. In the law-model "a trustee, because of his superior competence and the trust and reliance placed in him, owes a duty of undivided loyalty and devotion to his client, the more so when [he] ... enjoys as a class certain exclusive privileges to carry on his calling" (Freund, 1969, p. ix). Medicine offers an excellent example of the trustee-client relationship. The doctor, because of his extensive schooling and mastery of the medical discipline, is more knowledgeable and competent than the patient. Thus the patient must trust the doctor to do the best he can. Invested with this immense trust, the doctor is responsible for fully protecting and serving his patient to his utmost capabilities. The asymmetrical power distribution in this relationship is compensated by the doctor's commitment to use this power for the betterment of the client (Freund, 1969, p. ix).

In contrast, the sociological model "underscores the communal aspect of the endeavor, the reciprocity of rights and duties, the positive values to be pursued, encouraged and facilitated, as well as the hazards, limitations and safeguards" (Freund, 1969, p. viii). Unlike the law model, which is based on a trustee-client relationship, the sociological model is patterned around the professional collegium, where everyone is granted equal status and works towards a common goal. In this model the doctor and the patient and, similarly, the researcher and the research subject, are construed as equally significant if not equally knowledgeable participants in a common project. Power and responsibility in this relationship, then, are fundamentally distributed.

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