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14. Research Ethics in Context

Decision-Making in Digital Research

Annette Markham & Elizabeth Buchanan

Introduction

In 2012, we published *Ethical Decision-making and Internet Research*, which consolidated the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) Ethics Working Committee's recommendations into a comprehensive document. In 2015, we revisited the subject with *Internet Research: Ethical Concerns*, which took a practical approach to internet research ethics by reviewing the work of other researchers in the field. With the article you are reading now, we attempt to reconcile the abstract and the practice-based methods of our previous two articles by unpacking ethical decision-making in view of principles.

Digital media's fast development, expansion and increasing integration into our day-to-day lives does not just mean opportunity but also new ethical challenges for internet researchers. Each new data set entails its own potential quandaries and insights. By placing other researchers' work within AoIR guidelines, we seek to create a more cohesive framework to assist internet researchers, review boards, students and ethicists in ethically navigating the murky waters of internet research.

Recent evolutions in our field, especially surrounding big data, have evolved quickly and still need to be addressed. The task ahead is to expand the more developed concepts and incorporate these new issues into the discussion. We do, however, feel confident that the core issue remains the same: understanding how and to what extent basic principles affect ethical decision-making.

Ethical Fundamentals

A discussion of ethics in any research field must be rooted in the wide array of policy documents, such as the UN Declaration of Human Rights, the Nuremberg Code, the Declaration of Helsinki, and the Belmont Report. Given the extent to which these documents have been discussed elsewhere, we will limit our focus to issues of digital methodology and encourage readers to see the resources mentioned above and in the appendix for more on those fundamental issues.

Flexibility

As seen throughout our publications, our stance supports a flexible set of guidelines over stricter codes of practice. This allows researchers to respond and adapt to the ever-evolving nature of their field. In the end, it is their responsibility to conduct ethical research according to their individual judgements and values, in addition to their disciplinary norms. The core principles of such an ethical approach are dialogic, inductive, case-based and process-focused.

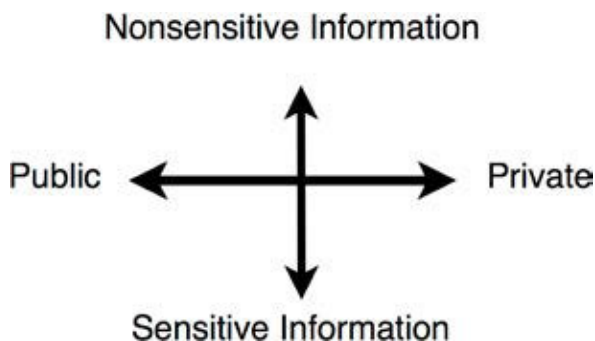
Privacy Concepts

The manner with which humans engage in public spaces continues to evolve as the spectrum of public-private spaces becomes less discernible. Researchers may find themselves vexed by the practical and methodological difficulties of tackling such a nebulous issue, one with little historical precedent to offer guidance. Expectations of privacy increasingly hinge on specific contextual factors as to how information is presented and used, as opposed to the antiquated binary conception of public/private.

Rather than attempting to place information in one box or the other, researchers such as Sveningsson (2003) offer new ways of perceiving this idea. Her grid expands the binary public/private spectrum to include an additional axis of informational sensitivity, so that researchers might better predict users' expectations for how their data may be used.

This diagram is still built around a conception of public and private as two opposite spaces. Attempting to identify within this binary is the wrong

Fig. 14.1: Sveningsson's (2003) model of internet privacy.

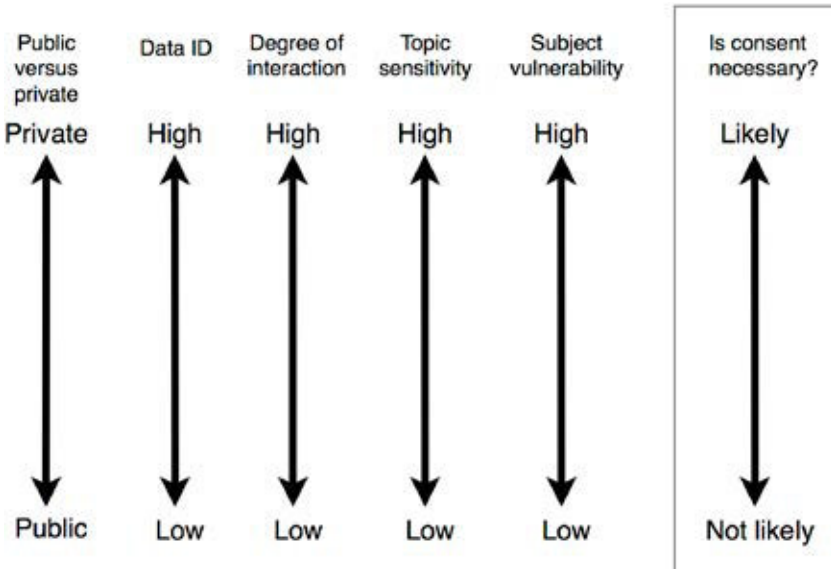


tack, since digital research means dealing with constant and open data flows between always connected parties in an environment where editing, sharing and other mashup practices are carried out within complex global networks.

McKee and Porter’s (2009) diagram focuses on the necessity of consent by attempting to balance competing factors. It, too, presents public/private as a binary, but it is a useful tool for approaching ethical dilemmas in research.

Users are often unaware of the extent to which their data may be picked up and used by data aggregators. Nissenbaum’s insight remains significant, pointing out that in media contexts ‘what people care most about is not simply restricting the flow of information but ensuring that it flows appropriately’ (2010: 2). Many internet users do not want their information to be private so much as they want it to only be used publicly in ways they find acceptable. Given the complications of such a stance, we encourage researchers to focus on a person’s relationship to their information in a given context when making ethical considerations.

Fig. 14.2: McKee and Porter’s (2009) dimensions for informed consent.



Identifiability

The ubiquity of freely available information on individuals has shifted the internet research ethics discussion from the Sisyphean task of preserving the privacy and anonymity of online parties to a discussion around the sheer quantity of data we both generate and access. The flood of personal data being created by individuals' devices (e.g. geolocation, physical data, online trackers) combined with big data collection tools creates increasingly complicated criteria for ethically conducting internet research. As of yet, there is no consensus on the best way to interact with personally identifiable information. For an in-depth exploration of the topic, see the chapter by Schäfer, Van Schie and Westra.

Informed Consent

The long-standing principle of informed consent becomes problematic when applied to internet or digital research. The ethical, as opposed to regulatory, question, 'when is consent needed?', becomes tricky to answer when applied to anonymous chatrooms and online forums. Moreover, consent may be difficult or impossible to obtain, since one's data may include outdated profiles or contact information. Ikonomidis Svedmark and Nyberg (2009) make a strong argument for making informed consent optional and leaving it to the researcher's discretion. Svedmark (2012) suggests that informed consent be a secondary priority to avoiding harm.

The AoIR ethics document advocates a case-based approach that acknowledges and considers ethical tensions, such as conflicts with legal, disciplinary, institutional and cultural considerations, even when a resolution is not easily found. By consistently posing ethical questions and reflecting on the research process, researchers will better balance their different obligations. In terms of consent, this means deciding whether and how to go about obtaining consent on a case-by-case basis.

Diagram on Internet Specific Ethical Questions

This diagram should function as a guide to forming ethical questions for internet research. It outlines considerations researchers should have in mind when forming these questions. We encourage students to form example questions following this form.

Table 14.1. Internet Specific Ethical Questions

Defining and conceptualizing context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Definitions from owners, users, members, etc. - Contextual norms, regulatory frameworks - Ethical expectations of user individuals and community
Accessing context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Contextual situation of participants and researcher - How researcher approaches participants - Participants' perception of privacy - Accommodating participants' feelings on appropriate flow of information
Involved parties	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ethical expectations of community, participants, authors and commercial or corporate parties - Future implications of stored data for individuals and communities
Primary object of study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ethical expectations associated with particular types of data - Range of persons and texts affected (in)directly by study - Treatment of potentially identifying information - Public availability of data acquired for research
Management, storage and representation of data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Methods for securing and managing potentially sensitive data - Risks of storing research data for future use - Unanticipated breaches in stored data - Ensuring adequate anonymity of data - Ethical consequences of anonymizing data - Potential distortions of data from removal of selected information - Possible future risks to anonymity from technological advances
Potential harms and risks associated with study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - For individuals, online communities, researchers, research, etc. - Risk assessment in advance and throughout study - Definitions and operationalization of 'vulnerability' and 'harm' - Determination of vulnerability in ambiguous contexts - Potential privacy-related harms - Harms to participants from parties besides researcher - Unknown identity, age or ability of participants
Verifiability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Relation between profiles and individuals - Representativeness of data sets - Potential for verification of results by later researchers - Influence of data providers/platform - Influence of data analysis and collection tools
Publication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ways data visualization shapes/supports argument - Context of research audience

Human Subjects and Personhood

A lively debate continues over how to treat data created by humans and collected through digital means. While the concept of ‘human subjects’ has historically been very important for preventing harmful treatment, traditional ideas of what that entails become harder to apply when dealing with online profiles and large, semi-anonymous data sets. For a deeper exploration of this topic, see the chapter by Van Schie, Westra and Schäfer.

Deeper, more constant crossover between our internet lives and our physical lives problematize definitions of personhood. This includes avatars and online profiles. Inconsistencies abound, as researchers’ perception of their research subjects as persons is often based on the directness of contact, which we described through ‘the distance principle’ in 2015. This principle states that an increase in experiential or conceptual proximity between researchers and participants prompts the former to identify more closely with the latter. They are then more prone to perceive the latter as ‘humans’ and to better consider the ethical implications and liability which that implies.

Seeing a photo on a profile may humanize the subject in a way that reading their metadata may not. Yet the consideration of a research object as a human subject should not be reduced to whether information is apparently linkable to an individual. There is a body of evidence suggesting that data sets that have been ‘anonymized’ often leave individuals identifiable. The question becomes: ‘Does the connection between one’s online data and one’s physical person enable psychological, economic or physical, harm?’ By recalling the distance principle, researchers might be more able to keep in mind the hidden ethical issues at play that may become visible later on.

Harm and Vulnerability

Despite understanding and conducting ethical research, researchers must be prepared to respond to harms. The recontextualization of information can produce unplanned outcomes, as innocent beginnings may lead to true harm down the road. The same information found within various contexts may require different privacy judgements. A user may feel comfortable broadcasting tweets to a public audience, following the norms of the Twitter community. Yet knowing that these ‘public’ tweets had been

collected within a data set and combed over by a researcher could quite possibly feel like an encroachment on their privacy. In spite of what a simplified concept of public/private might offer, there is no categorical way to discern all eventual harm. The notion of 'downstream' harms must be considered.

Harm is a flexible and subjective concept. A researcher could feasibly take the 'public' nature of tweets or Facebook posts to indicate that a user has given tacit consent. However, without considering the conceivable harm to a subject, that researcher has not taken proper precautions. In such a context, guidelines for decision-making can be applied using our diagram on forming Internet Specific Ethical Questions.

Conclusions

To contextualize, we urge researchers to begin thinking about the ethical issues we have outlined herein before starting research, during research and after it has concluded. In our 2012 *Ethical Decision-making and Internet Research*, we developed key guiding principles we believe remain crucial in relation to the ethical considerations of digital research:

The greater the vulnerability of the community/author/participant, the greater the obligation of the researcher to protect the community/author/participant.

Because 'harm' is defined contextually, ethical principles are more likely to be understood inductively rather than applied universally. That is, rather than one-size-fits-all pronouncements, ethical decision-making is best approached through the application of practical judgement attentive to the specific context.

Because all digital information at some point involves individual persons, consideration of principles related to research on human subjects may be necessary even if it is not immediately apparent how and where persons are involved in the research data.

When making ethical decisions, researchers must balance the rights of subjects (as authors, as research participants, as people) with the social benefits of research and researchers' rights to conduct research. In different contexts the rights of subjects may outweigh the benefits of research.

Ethical issues may arise and need to be addressed during all steps of the research process, from planning, research conduct, publication, and dissemination.

Ethical decision-making is a deliberative process, and researchers should consult as many people and resources as possible in this process, including fellow researchers, people participating in or familiar with contexts/sites being studied, research review boards, ethics guidelines, published scholarship (within one's discipline but also in other disciplines), and, where applicable, legal precedent.

These basic guidelines help to address the challenges a digital researcher might face, though the conversation does and must continue. Research practices are diverse; while the United States and the United Kingdom have institutional review boards to monitor researchers' ethical decisions, many countries do not. Research ethics conferences are increasingly common as researchers grapple with challenges presented by the emergence of big data and found data; discussions, too, are ongoing around the differences between performing research for professional or commercial parties. We need academic associations to continually expand the ways in which we address these areas.

For the moment, consider that no single ethical or methodological approach can fit every situation. Yet we hope that by considering ethical issues throughout the research process, researchers will be able to confidently and conscientiously develop ethical practices that are appropriate for their individual situations.

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