



Ethical internet research: challenges and solutions

An ethics workshop for researchers

Report

Synopsis:

The workshop aimed to:

1. Enable participants to consider the ethical challenges of using the internet to conduct research, and equip them with some ways of tackling these issues.
2. Allow participants to discuss a case study focusing on a research project which uses the internet.
3. Provide participants with an opportunity to raise issues relating to their specific research projects.

The workshop was opened by Professor Richard Jenkins, Chair of the University Research Ethics Committee (UREC). Presentations were given by Professor Charles Ess and Dr Julia Davies.

Professor Charles Ess is a Professor of Philosophy and Religion at Drury University and is currently on secondment to the Department of Information and Media Studies at Aarhus University, Denmark. He was the President of the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) from 2007 to 2009, and the lead author on the AoIR's *Ethical decision-making and internet research report*, published in 2002. He is also the author of *Digital Media Ethics*, published in 2009, the first textbook on the central ethical issues of digital media, ranging from computers and the internet to mobile phones.

Dr Julia Davies is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Education at the University of Sheffield. She investigates how people use technology to produce texts as part of their everyday-life, such as in social networking sites like Facebook, Flickr or YouTube. She also investigates the ways in which people learn in online spaces and is developing ways of analysing online interaction.

Session 1:

The workshop opened with a presentation by Professor Charles Ess entitled:

- **Ethical internet research: challenges and re(solutions)**

The presentation can be viewed and downloaded from:

www.sheffield.ac.uk/ris/other/gov-ethics/ethicspolicy/further-guidance/educationresources/internetworkshop

Each participant was provided with a copy of the *Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research (version 2.0) Recommendations from the AoIR Ethics Working Committee*. The new guidelines will be published shortly; however, the current guidelines can be viewed here: <http://aoir.org/documents/ethics-guide/>

Following the presentation, participants were split into six groups based on their disciplines, to discuss the challenges which they faced in their research and how these could be addressed using the guidelines introduced by Professor Ess.

Group 1 was a group of health researchers. Their research is frequently ethically reviewed by the NHS and they are used to obtaining informed consent. There is an NHS requirement that participants are given 24 hours to consider whether to participate after being provided with the project information. Researchers find it harder to build in this 'thinking' time when conducting research online.

Group 2 discussed a project which used the internet to conduct a survey on depression. The researcher had informed participants that the survey may cause distress, stated that participants could exit the survey at any point and provided advice to participants to contact their GP in the event of distress. However, the Group questioned whether this was sufficient given the sensitive nature of the topic and as the researcher had no direct access to participants.

Group 3 discussed whether a divide exists between how actions are perceived online and offline. For example, children may engage in sexualised activities online as they do not perceive a risk to exist. One researcher mentioned a case where children had been victimised by a trusted adult who asked them to remove their clothing in front of a webcam. The children themselves didn't feel victimised whereas the parents were traumatised when they discovered what had happened.

Group 4 were researchers from the Information School. They frequently use the internet as a conduit for their research. They encounter similar ethical issues as when conducting face to face research, but find research via the internet to be cheaper and easier. They often encounter issues of data storage, e.g. SurveyMonkey is subject to US regulations but these contradict European data laws.

Group 5 were researchers who conduct research abroad. They have experienced issues when undertaking research in a country where there is government control of the internet, issues of language translation, problems with referencing and citing data sources and deciding when and how to obtain informed consent.

Group 6 discussed the ethics of using information on the internet when the person in question has died. The information is still present on the internet but is it ethical to use it? They also discussed social networking sites, including whether users are really safe and how the information gathered on people is used.

Session 2:

Session 1 was followed with a presentation by Dr Julia Davies entitled:

- **Ethical research online**

The presentation can be viewed and downloaded from:

www.sheffield.ac.uk/ris/other/gov-ethics/ethicspolicy/further-guidance/educationresources/internetworkshop

Session 3:

Following Dr Davies' presentation, the participants split into small groups to discuss a case study.

Case study: Facebook recruitment

Jamie is a PhD student in the School of Nutrition and Dietetics, whose thesis topic is the experience of teenage sufferers of anorexia in UK schools. She is particularly interested in the experiences of those who are not 'out' as sufferers of anorexia and hence proposes a novel means of contacting potential participants to be involved in a focus group.

There are several groups on Facebook that serve as support networks for those with anorexia, some of which encourage sufferers of the disease to seek help, and some which give advice on how to resist help and keep their disease concealed. Jamie intends to set up a Facebook account and then use this as a means to befriend some key players ('connectors', she calls them in her research proposal) in these networks, prior to informing them of the nature of her research, and her desire for them to take part in the focus group. She hopes that once she has the connectors on board, they will be able to do most of the rest of the recruitment work. She believes that working through these connectors will ensure a greater spread of participants.

Jamie intends to recommend that those taking part in the focus group inform their parents, but she thinks that this is not a requirement, as many of the target research participants will not be 'out' to their parents, and so would be unwilling to discuss the research with their parents. She argues that it would be unacceptable to use only research participants who were 'out' to their parents, because this would skew the sample towards sufferers who were more likely to be receiving help. Hence, if she only used teenagers who could discuss such things with their parents, she would inevitably end up with too-rosy a picture of the experiences of young sufferers of anorexia in UK schools.

This case study was provided by Dr David Hunter, Keele University, as part of the discussion materials for AREC's University Seminar on 17.02.11 'Digitisation: Big Word, Big Impact'.

The task

Each group was asked to consider the ethical issues posed by the study, if they would permit the study to go ahead and what assurances/adjustments they would seek from the researcher about the proposed research.

The following issues were raised:

- The research should not be allowed to go ahead based upon the information provided.
- The researcher has failed to consider how the members of the Facebook group will feel when they discover that they have been researched covertly by someone concealing their true identity and purpose.
- The researcher cannot be sure of the participants' true identities.
- The researcher has not fully considered her duty of care as a researcher; for example, how would she would respond if participants discuss self-harm or suicide?; what support mechanisms would she put in place for participants who need them, since they will be considering potentially very distressing issues?
- The language used in the case study description is depicting the participants as research subjects, who are there to be investigated, rather than as human beings.
- The researcher appears to be basing her research methodology on the assumption that teenagers who can discuss their anorexia with their parents will have a better experience/outcome, when this may not necessarily be the case and could bias the research.
- The researcher is not clear about why she needs people who are 'not out' to participate in the project.
- It is not clear whether the focus group the researcher intends to run will be online or face-to-face.
- The researcher has failed to consider obtaining information consent from any of the participants, including whether it is necessary to obtain parental informed consent.
- The researcher wishes to identify key connectors in the group but has failed to consider that this may coerce people into participating, and could be seen a misuse of trust.
- The researcher has not considered that she may require support herself after conducting the research, as she may be exposed to some traumatic information/situations.
- The researcher has not considered how she will report her findings, e.g. will she anonymise the participants?
- It is not clear whether the researcher has any specialist skills in dealing with young people with anorexia.
- The researcher may be using the internet for this research for the wrong reasons (e.g. because it is easier to contact people) – however, is it the best way to conduct the research? For example, is the data collected likely to be sufficiently reliable, or could participants be exaggerating or inventing experiences to impress their peers?

After the discussion session, the audience were provided with a document summarising some of the ethical issues posed by the case study. This can be downloaded from: www.sheffield.ac.uk/ris/other/gov-ethics/ethicspolicy/further-guidance/educationresources/internetworkshop (please note: this is not an exhaustive list of ethical issues).