

INTRODUCTION: Why IJIRE?

The *International Journal of Internet Research Ethics* represents a qualitatively new phase in the increasingly extensive and increasingly urgent deliberation upon and development of ethical guidelines for Internet research.

This deliberation is perhaps as old as Internet research itself – and has grown rapidly alongside the Internet. Less than ten years after the first set of four World Wide Web servers came online in 1992, the Ethics Working Group was established by the Association of Internet Researchers in 2000, charged with developing ethical guidelines for Internet research. There were multiple factors driving this decision and work: especially within the United States – where, for better *and* for worse, much of the Internet research of the 1990s originated – researchers in a range of disciplines were encountering a consistent series of difficulties as they submitted their research proposals to their university Institutional Review Boards (IRBs). Such IRBs are mandated by U.S. law to ensure that human subjects research undertaken with federal funds does not violate basic requirements of human subjects protections, as codified in the Code of Federal Regulations, and as described in the seminal *Belmont Report*. Informed consent, respect for persons, and beneficence are fundamental, grounding elements of human subjects research.

While there is no quarrel but that such protections are necessary, just how these protections were to be applied to research on "virtual subjects" in online environments was not always clear, neither to IRBs nor researchers. And even without the promptings of an IRB (or its institutional equivalents in Australia, Canada, and the U.K.), thoughtful and reflective researchers across the globe found themselves confronted with difficult ethical questions evoked in their research for which no obvious or immediate guidance was available. There was hence an increasingly widespread recognition that ethical guidelines for Internet research were urgently needed.

The AoIR Ethics Working Group published their ethical guidelines in 2002, following the approval of the AoIR membership – and, happily, those guidelines have found extensive use both within the United States and around the world. But since that time, of course, both the Internet (now connecting over 1/6th of the world's population)

and thereby the scope of Internet research, has continued to dramatically expand. At the same time, as we learned from the most recent ethics panel at the AoIR Internet Research 8.0 conference in Vancouver, IRBs and their correlative institutions in the U.K. and Australia are no longer an Anglophone phenomenon. Rather, several of our European colleagues reported to us that they are increasingly facing the kinds of questions and review procedures that until recently, seemed to be a primarily US phenomenon. This means that, just as the Internet continues to expand its global reach, and as Internet research follows close behind, becoming an ever-more international and interdisciplinary enterprise, international perspectives on the myriad ethical issues that inevitably emerge when we seek to study human beings will continually grow urgent.

In our view, the scope and depth of reflection and scholarship on Internet research ethics has reached the point where a journal devoted exclusively to these topics is justified – and, indeed, necessary. It is not simply that more and more people, in more and more places around the world, are researching engagements online by more and more people, who likewise reflect an ever-increasing diversity of countries and cultures; it is that *IJIRE* is needed as a central venue for the collection and dissemination of a rapidly burgeoning body of research and reflection. It is further the case that as our ethical difficulties and (re)new(ed) insights into their possible resolutions exponentially increase with the global growth of the Internet, researchers, the people they study, and the institutions responsible for Internet research oversight thus ever more urgently need the reflections, understandings of law and professional ethics, and insights into new ways of resolving sometimes new ethical difficulties that we seek to make available through *IJIRE*. This journal is meant to bridge theory and practice. We seek to represent disparate disciplines, locales, ideologies, and legal perspectives. We have assembled an amazingly unique editorial board, top scholars in the field of Internet research ethics, representing an array of nationalities and disciplinary expertise. We embrace writings from students, and encourage feedback from academic communities across the globe. We recognize cultural and disciplinary differences in writing, and will not “force” our authors to fit any rigid model or mode of presentation. In this first issue, we present an array of articles, which explore various dimensions of Internet research ethics, ranging from methodological to legal to philosophical. Each article demonstrates the ongoing complexities researchers

and policy makers are facing—and indeed, embracing—as Internet research and the consideration of its ethical implications assumes greater prominence across the world.

In addition to our editorial comments and regular articles, each issue will feature “small talk,” a short conversation with a leading voice in Internet research ethics. For this inaugural issue, we feature Annette Markham, who recently held a conversation with a graduate seminar, Global Issues in Internet Research Ethics, at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Next issue will feature Susannah Stern. A forthcoming feature will include a practical scenario, or ethical dilemma, that a researcher or board has faced in their experiences in Internet research. Feel free to send in your experiences (ijire@sois.uwm.edu). Again, we hope *IJIRE* reaches a range of stakeholders, through a combination of theory and practice. We are bound to have a few mistakes along the way, and we ask in advance for your understanding!

Welcome to our inaugural issue!