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Introduction to the Special Issue: Research ethics in online communities

INTRODUCTION

I first became interested in Internet research ethics in 2004, when I began my Masters degree. Eager to "do the right thing" in designing my methodology when examining the identity processes in a population of physically disabled users of virtual worlds, I trawled the literature and sat in on countless seminars seeking suitable online ethics guidelines. It was during this time that I met the IJIRE's editor Charles Ess and others who were actively considering these issues, like Heidi McKee and Jim Porter.

Yet although I found generic recommendations, I found little direction for questions originating in the social sciences, and even fewer for research that dealt with the complexities of the social fabric of online communities.

In the years that have followed, and having continued to designed both qualitative and quantitative studies in online communities since, I have discovered a rapidly increasing cohort of social scientists and community researchers eager to help define best practice but who are similarly unable to identify a single best practice protocol. Although our disciplines and starting points may vary, our intentions are the same: to use methods that take care of both research participant and community as a whole. It seems that rather than the methods used being problematic, it's the committees' understandings of online research in these special environments that creates the confusion.

My continued interest in this area has led me to publish chapters, articles and countless blog posts, and to give talks and lectures on the topic, yet I am aware that mine is only one voice actively considering the intricacies of the ethics of research in online communities. When I was approached by Charles to edit a special issue for the IJIRE, I felt it was an opportunity to collaborate with others struggling with the same problems, and to create a collection of case studies that would describe the successes and failures in designing for these unique virtual social phenomena.

This special issue therefore aims to reach two audiences: researchers who are at the beginnings of their online community research who seek guidance for ethical designs, and members of ethics committees who seek guidance on examples of best practices in online communities.

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ETHICAL RESEARCH IN ONLINE COMMUNITIES

The Web offers huge possibilities for current and future generations of researchers and, with the relative freedom to explore, define, collect, analyse and distribute knowledge with little consistent regulation, scholars are currently experiencing a golden age of research online. At present, the only real limits to data collection and analysis are our technological expertise and the size of our processors. But if we begin to factor in the human on the other side of the screen, by considering the ethical implications of our methods, we necessarily begin to limit our designs.

There are many online contexts, relevant to both the form of the interaction (e.g., text, audio or video) and to the environment under scrutiny (e.g., online community, e-commerce site, business application, etc), and they each require nuanced ethical approaches. For example, a more situated and community-focussed ethical protocol may be required when documenting the practices of individuals who are part of social networking sites, blogging groups, listservs and forums, than when the objects under scrutiny are transactions made during virtual auctions or in the user interactions with Web page designs.

Indeed, while the Web does connect people to information, it also – crucially – connects them to each other. This feature demands that social scientists and online community researchers face the person behind the screen when doing research; rather than looking only at the technology that powers interpersonal connections, it's necessary to understand how connections are meaningful to the people who make them, and how our designs affect them.

PROTECTING THE ONLINE INDIVIDUAL

Ethical guidelines exist to protect the research participant from harm, yet until relatively recently, the notion of "harm" coming to a virtual research participant was an issue that many scholars new to the online space were unaware of, or believed could be solved by using an online pseudonym in place of an offline identity. There were features of online life that were considered problematic for ethics committees – for example, how to gain consent, how to ensure that the information about the participant was true and correct, and how to ensure that the identity presented to the research is true and accurate – but in general, these were considered within the contexts of existing offline ethical protocols and new formulations specific to the online participant were rare or overlooked.

Yet as many researchers who have been examining online community and its participants over the two decades of the World Wide Web and the four decades of the Internet have commented in articles, book chapters and seminars, the online community member requires special concern akin to that given to offline

individuals, despite these specific features. For example, the sanctity of the status and the reputation of the virtual identity in the community are paramount, because they are the most important social currency in these environments. Asa Rosenberg describes this in detail in her contribution to this special issue, *Virtual World Research Ethics and the private/public distinction*.

Additionally, the Web can foster communities of practice between individuals who gather around sensitive topics, like drug abuse and health issues. Relying on existing mechanisms for participant protection in similar offline research may not be possible in these situations; Dan O'Connor proposes a framework for ethical protocols that address the potential harm that research may pose to individuals who may not have proximate, physical support mechanisms in *Apomediation and Ancillary Care: Researchers' responsibilities in health-related online communities*, while Monica Barratt and Simon Lenton explore the effects of participant observation techniques in another sensitive group in *Beyond Recruitment: Participatory online research with people who use drugs*.

PROTECTING THE ONLINE COMMUNITY

There is a further area for consideration when designing research for this medium: online communities are complex social negotiations between disproximate individuals who are engaged in what William Gibson described as a "consensual hallucination" (1984). Distinct from non-community online interactions, members of these groups form interpersonal systems over time and through repeated [interaction] that result in stable governance and hierarchy, featuring rules, regulations and distinctive norms.

Although the medium may support a sense of the collective by enhancing the sense of within-group similarity and out-group difference (Spears & Lea, 1994), its computer-mediated nature increases the potential for instability. Grimes, Fleischman & Jaeger (2009) have argued that the action of conducting research *at all* may cause damage to the fragile social ecology, as well as to the individual.

Internet methodologists have described virtual communities as extremely sensitive; a breach in trust can destabilise the foundations upon which the online group rests. This may be more or less apparent in different types of online communities. For example, goal-oriented spaces, like games, and social networking sites, like Facebook, may have a stronger sense of stability than social virtual worlds because they are predicated upon the pre-determined goal systems bestowed by the designers or upon relationships developed offline. In contrast, social virtual worlds or forums that do not rely on existing connections or a designer-generated scaffolding to bind individuals together rest upon the social collectives that exist within their boundaries. These distinctions are considered by Ren Reynolds and Melissa deZwart in their paper, *The Duty to Play: Ethics, EULAs and MMOs*. Ethical transgressions may result in power shifts and mass migrations in protest of research activity to other sites can change the fabric of the community (e.g., Donath, 1998). These are some of the issues described by Herman Tavani & Frances Grodzinsky in their paper, *Applying the "Contextual Integrity" model of privacy to blogging and the blogosphere*.

Indeed, the method of data collection can cause harm to the community, as researchers gain an understanding of what is considered "public" and "private" behaviour. Mark Griffiths and Monica Whitty warn in *Online behavioural tracking in Internet gambling research: Methodological, ethical and practical issues* that the simplicity with which enormous amounts of data can be captured via the Internet requires researchers to consider the value of such data (in both the short and long terms), the implications for documenting identifiable behaviour and the security of the storage methods, while Natasha Whiteman describes the responsibility the researcher has to divulge his or her identity to a community if the global privacy settings are changed mid-way through collection, in *Control and contingency: Maintaining ethical stances in research*.

There are other issues not covered in this special issue that warrant further attention. For example, the international nature of the online medium requires researchers to consider the accepted ethical perspectives in other cultures and nations. Second, the anonymity of the medium demands greater investment of time by the people who seek to collect and use data from the Web in order to establish a mutually beneficial trust relationship. However, as the authors who contributed to this special issue describe in each of the case studies in this volume, although the medium presents challenges to existing ethical approaches, the Internet does not inherently transform the accepted protocols. The technology connects people to people via a network, and therefore we must be sensitive to the rights of the human subjects behind the connections.

CONCLUSION

This special issue has drawn together seven case studies from the social sciences and humanities that describe best ethical practices in the investigation of online communities.

It aims to create a compendium of case studies and theoretical frameworks which future scholars will reference when designing their own analyses of populations and practices in social networking sites, weblogs, listservs, online games, video sharing sites, virtual worlds and other Web environments that demonstrate evidence of community processes.

It is hoped that this volume introduces extensions to existing theories – including new frameworks for approaching the ethical issues that emerge in online communities and novel applications of existing offline ethics frameworks – and examples of best practice – including case studies of successful ethical solutions, both qualitative and quantitative research approaches, issues associated with international ethics practices, and changes to ethical approaches over the short- and the long-term. The technology was built to connect people with information. What has happened is that it has connected people with people. This special issue aims to make steps towards establishing frameworks for supporting its continued relevance to the future, for both the people who create it and those who study them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aleks Krotoski is a Research Associate at the Oxford Internet Institute and the Researcher-in-Residence at the British Library. She completed a PhD in Social Psychology in 2009 at the University of Surrey examining

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