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Control And Contingency: Maintaining Ethical Stances In Research¹

ABSTRACT

Drawing from the author's experience of carrying out observational research in two online communities, this paper explores the instability of localised research ethics. The paper presents a framework for conceptualising the ongoing production and destabilisation of ethical stances in research, arguing that such destabilisation can be productive, provoking methodological/ethical learning.

INTRODUCTION

In a comparison of different theoretical approaches to the relationship between technology and society, Lievrouw describes how the development of new media involves "a dynamic relationship between determination and contingency" (Lievrouw, 2006, p. 258):

Determination is the effort to specify conditions or "impose coherence" in a situation with the intent of achieving some desired outcome [...] *Contingency* is the existence of many possible conditions in an uncertain situation. Complete certainty is never fully achieved, so in a sense there is no final design 'solution' for a given technological problem. Rather, designers contend with contingency by making choice from among existing conditions or by creating new ones. In turn, these choices create new conditions and uncertainties that prompt further specifications or choices, and so on. (Lievrouw, 2006, p. 258, her emphasis)

We can perhaps recognise a similar tension between determination (or as I am thinking about it here, 'control') and contingency in the development of a different type of (methodological) technology - the design and production of research ethics. The 'doing' of research ethics involves an effort to "specify conditions" in respect of an outcome; broadly the production of (ethical) research. The researcher must be able to establish a workable ethical position in respect of key methodological decisions. This involves a fixing of research ethics that is often evident in the setting down of the groundwork of projects in the initial design and proposing of research. Yet this fixing is only temporary and usually broad-brushed, in contrast to the actual experience of research. Initial design efforts are likely to be undone, or at least challenged, by the contingent nature of research practice and the unexpected events that researchers may face. The question then is how the researcher "contends" with this contingency.

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This paper explores this tension between control and contingency by examining the instability of research ethics that are embedded in the local details of research practice. It develops an understanding of the negotiation of situated ethics in research - both online and off - as involving the localised production of ethical stances; stances that are established relationally in respect of different contexts that present their own, occasionally competing, ethical discourses. The paper describes how these contexts/discourses can inform the ongoing production of ethics in research whilst also serving to destabilise the stances that researchers construct. It then examines the resulting instability of the ongoing production of ethical stances, focusing on contingent events arising from the empirical settings of research. It considers how particular moments crystallise this ongoing instability, arguing that the challenges that this instability presents – although often uncomfortable to experience – can be useful, forcing reflection on the ethical decisions we make, and the assumptions that these are based on.

LOCAL ETHICS

What are we doing when we make ethical decisions in research? Situated approaches to research ethics suggest that we not just complying with general principles or following pre-established procedures. Instead, researchers are faced with the challenge of making contextualised judgements about the best course of action that are anchored in the local contexts of research. This way of thinking about research ethics, although not unique to Internet research, has been influential in the responses of researchers to the challenges of online research practice – with a rejection of ‘one size fits all’ approaches to research ethics in favour of ethical decision-making that is “tailored” to the diverse environments of the Internet (Enyon, Fry and Schroeder, 2008).

Such localising moves are evident in critiques of ethical codes, rules and guidance that are based on generalised conceptualisations of the Internet and Internet-based research.² They are also evident in researcher’s rejections of approaches to ethics that suggest that ethical decision-making can be insulated from the actual experience of research. In her discussion of qualitative ICT research, for example, Markham (2006) describes how many textbook approaches to ethics neglect the localised nature of ethical practice, instead tending to codify ethics as involving the constitution and regulation of “an a priori stance.” She challenges this characterisation by drawing attention to the way that ethics are embedded within methodological action; action that is located in specific locations and situations. This suggests an approach to ethics that are shaped and, in Walther’s (2002) terms, “confined by context.” In a similar way, Cavanagh (1999) has suggested that researchers’ actions should be informed by their understanding of the cultures they study, and McKee and Porter (2008) have suggested that in making ethical decisions researchers should “attend to the complexities of context, of place, of situation, of technologies, of methodologies, and of authors/persons/players/residents” (McKee and Porter, 2009, p. 147).

² For example of such critiques see Herring, 1996; Walther, 2002.

The conceptual move away from universal, general principles towards local, contextually-embedded instantiations of ethics is not, of course, new or unique to scholarship relating to the Internet. It has historical antecedents in accounts of ethical decision-making during fieldwork-based research and in the discussion of the nature of qualitative inquiry more broadly, and has been established by researchers working within different disciplines, including education (e.g. Simons and Usher, 2000), geography (e.g. White and Bailey, 2004), and sociology (e.g. Calvey, 2008). Simons and Usher (2000), for example, present a move towards ethical localisation in their conceptualisation of “situated ethics”:

For us, the whole point about a situated ethics is precisely that it is situated, and this implies that it is immune to universalization. A situated ethics is local and specific to particular practices. It cannot be universalized, and therefore any attempt to formulate a theory of situated ethics, given that any theorization strives for universality, must be doomed to failure. This is not to say that in any particular practice universal statements or principles of a general nature are inappropriate and unhelpful. However, it is to say that any such statements or principles will be mediated by the local and specific – by, in other words, the situatedness which constitutes that practice. (Simons and Usher, 2000, p. 2)

Emphasising localisation in this way focuses attention on “the difficulty and complexity of such decision-making in situations where recourse cannot be had to indubitable foundations and irrecontrovertible principles” (Simons and Usher, 2000, p. 3). What this does not do, however, is provide a framework for thinking about what researchers are doing when their actions are being informed by “the local and specific.”

It is important to note that, as Simons and Usher suggest, an emphasis on localised ethics does not exclude the relevance of general principles to the practice of research. McKee and Porter (2009), for example, describe their own belief in “the fundamental universal research principle of “Do no harm” to research participants or their communities,” but how they “[...] believe that determining the potential and degree of harm requires procedural principles” (p. 145). Rather than rejecting general principles, localised approaches to ethics instead draw attention to their interpretation and relevance in respect of the specific interests and contexts of research (the way that a researcher requesting consent might be disruptive in one environment but welcomed in another, for example).

UNSTABLE ETHICS

A second emphasis in recent work involves a recognition of the *instability* of research ethics. This recognition is, again, not new, and extends beyond Internet research writing. The challenges of managing the “contingent, dynamic, temporal, occasioned” nature of situated ethics, involving ongoing “practical manoeuvres and tactics” (Calvey, 2008, p. 912) has been noted by researchers working in different academic fields (although more vocally by those using qualitative methods). This work draws attention to the way that localised research ethics are “fluid, ongoing and situated in everyday life” (White and Bailey, 2004, p. 142), suggesting that any consideration of “ethics in practice” (Gullemin and Gillam, 2004) needs to involve a

consideration of “the difficult, often subtle, and usually unpredictable situations that arise in the practice of doing research” (p. 262).³

Perhaps unsurprisingly, those engaged in longitudinal fieldwork have paid particular attention to the dynamic and fluctuating nature of localised ethics. This is because, as Hammersley has suggested, there is particular uncertainty in research in:

“so-called ‘natural’ settings that are not under the control of the researcher. Here, method is closely implicated with the particular, and changing, circumstances in those places where data are to be collected. In such research, it is unlikely to be possible for researchers to anticipate and describe all the relevant circumstances of their research to ethics committees.” (Hammersley, 2009, p. 215)

Researchers’ descriptions of role conflicts and changing relationships during research (see for example Adler and Adler, 1987), and of ethical dilemmas faced during covert participant observation,⁴ draw such instability to the foreground. Such accounts suggest that localised ethical decision-making needs to be understood as unstable and sensitive to change.⁵ They also demonstrate the ways that the empirical settings of research can influence and challenge the ongoing production of research ethics.

To take one example: ethical instability is evident in a paper on the practice and ethics of ethnographic research in American hospitals by Mattingly (2005). Mattingly challenges the universal assumptions that she argues underpin institutional understandings of how ethical behaviour might be monitored and governed by ethics review procedures (particularly in clinical research)⁶ by drawing attention to the changing nature of her relationship to her research participants and the resultant shifts in ethical ground that she experienced in her work. One focus involved shifting concerns regarding confidentiality. Mattingly describes her experience of how, as she developed relationships with her participants, the ground rules established by the consent process were challenged by participants’ changing desires; specifically when participants started to regard her research as an opportunity “to be heard, to tell their stories, to voice their perspective on what it is like to care for a very ill child or negotiate with the health care system” (p. 455). The promise of confidentiality established at the outset of research then started become to be seen as a problematic ethical straightjacket, imposed by regulators and denying these participants their desired voice (although, as she notes, other participants remained glad of their anonymity). Such changes, which could not be anticipated in advance of the study, instead emerged during the research process, in the “context of a developing relationship with those studied” (p. 456), and within “the context of real-life circumstances and research relationships” (p. 457).

³ What these authors term “ethically important moments” in research.

⁴ See, for example, Homan’s description of the different kinds of “ethical problem” that he experienced during his research in Pentecostal churches when confronted with activities that went against his personal beliefs (1980).

⁵ Hammersley describes how this recognition has led to recommendations that some research should undergo continuous ethical review (Hammersley, 2009, p. 215).

⁶ Specifically the assumption that ethical rules are “context-free” and that they can involve the application of “universal rules, norms and theories” to guarantee an ethical outcome (p. 462).

Internet researchers have similarly emphasised the need for a continuous negotiation of ethics in the face of empirical developments that cannot be anticipated in advance of research. As Allen notes:

“since the ethical researcher cannot a priori adjudicate what will be harmful, it is necessary to redevelop ethical research practices by engaging in creative ‘ethical work’ in situ, in dialogue with participants and perhaps other researchers, and throughout the research and publication processes” (Allen, 1996, n.p.).

Markham’s call for “context sensitivity” in research also emphasises the need for continual “reflexive adaptation,” whereby the researcher must “constantly ask the most difficult questions” about their research practice and its legitimacy (Markham, 2003, p. 62). This suggests a movement, an emergent shaping of ethical design in respect of the production of research. In a similar way, McKee and Porter outline their approach to “research ethics as continuous process of inquiry, interaction, and critique throughout the entire research study [...]” (McKee and Porter, 2009, p. 148). They draw attention to the anticipation and revision of ethical issues that goes on during research, as well as researchers’ reflections upon the decisions they have made after research projects are completed (p. 144), suggesting that the researcher’s “ethos” is “an identity that is constructed, perhaps even modified, through the course of a research project” (p. 145).

This literature also introduces what is perhaps one of the characteristic features of online research, the challenge of working within technological environments whose architecture and organisation can be shaped and changed at will. By adjusting one technical setting, for example, the owners of a website can transform an environment from requiring a log-in to make a post, to requiring a log-in to view activity. Such developments have direct repercussions for researchers as well as users of such sites (not least in respect of the researchers’ definition of the site in terms of the public/private distinction - see boyd, 2008 for discussion of this). In their introduction to *Internet Inquiry* (2009) Markham and Baym suggest the resultant challenges of working in dynamic and unstable environments where “the research contexts, technologies, and [...] very nature of their social worlds seem to change, converge, collide, or collapse” (2009, p. ix). Whilst descriptions of fieldwork in natural settings emphasise that, offline as well as online, the changing contexts of research can be destabilising, attention to the pliability of technological environments presents a different inflection on the sorts of empirical contingencies that Internet researchers may face.

ETHICAL STANCES IN RESEARCH

The rejection of the application of general ethical principles in favour of localised, situated ethical decision-making focuses attention on the ways that researchers work through ethical issues in respect of their projects (or, as Birch et al ask; “How are theory and intention ‘lived’ in the research context?” (2002, p. 2)).

The literature I have described above presents an image of researchers positioned at the intersection of competing interests, grappling with changing contexts and multiple audiences, considering practical decisions relating to the collection, handling and archiving of data whilst also needing to be sensitive to the specific characteristics of their research environments, their responsibilities to their research participants, and their own research aspirations. How might we impose some conceptual order on our understanding of the complex and ongoing ethical manoeuvring that these demands and this positioning implies?

I want to suggest that the activity of producing localised ethics in research can be thought of as involving the ongoing construction of an ethical stance, a stance that is relationally established in relation to four distinct, but related, domains in which ethics are constituted. These involve the articulation and negotiation of ethical guidance and principles in academic work (the *ethics of the academy*); within the empirical settings of research (the *ethics of the researched*); within the context of the individuals involved in the production of the research (the *ethics of the researcher*) and finally within the institutional contexts that frame the production of research (the *ethics of the institution*).

Each domain presents different resources that can be recruited in the construction of an ethical stance. In respect of the ethics of the academy, for example, the researcher might draw from the codes of ethics of different professional research associations, from the very broad body of scholarship on research ethics (both relating to online research and offline research), or more informally from correspondence with colleagues. Online, the ethics of the researched is codified within the FAQs and rules of use of different environments, as well as emerging within the day-to-day interactions between participants. Within the context of the institution, ethical discourses are established and negotiated within the expression of codes of practice, guidance and review procedures, and in the discussion and advice of ethics committees etc. The ethics of researcher is perhaps more difficult to define, as it is less bureaucratised, but can involve affiliations to political perspectives and personal/professional commitments and allegiances. These domains are not homogenous and each can demonstrate the ongoing negotiation and contestation of ethics.

In each case, in respect of the ethics of the researcher, researched, academy and institution, a distinction can be made between the weakly (I-) and strongly (I+) institutionalised discourses of the domain. These are set out in Fig. 1 below:

Ethical Discourse		
Ethical Domain	I -	I +
Researcher	Personal Contingencies <i>e.g. emergent commitments, affiliations</i>	Personal codes <i>e.g. the researcher's political affiliations</i>
Researched	Setting contingencies <i>e.g. ongoing negotiation of ethics within the activity of the researched settings</i>	Setting codes <i>e.g. agreements on rights/values (such as rules of use)</i>
Academy	Academic contingencies <i>e.g. discussion with colleagues, feedback on presentations.</i>	Academic codes <i>e.g. research ethics frameworks, guidance in journal articles</i>
Institution	Official contingencies <i>e.g. announcements of university edicts, ethics committee advice</i>	Official codes <i>e.g. University codes of ethics</i>

Fig. 1 Four Domains of Ethics

The second and third columns of Fig. 1 present a distinction between the weakly institutionalised contingencies (which represent the more weakly “institutionalised practices of the everyday” (Dowling, 2009, 231)) and the strongly institutionalised ethical codes that are reinforced with some regularity in these four domains.

The strongly institutionalised articulation of ethical guidance and affiliations in column three present resources that researchers can familiarise themselves with before they embark on their research and draw from in their moves to specify the conditions of their ethical decision-making. As these resources tend to be explicitly codified, they present relatively secure points of reference that can inform the design and explanation of research. These discourses therefore appear to provide a locus of control in respect of the researcher’s construction of their ethical stance. The weakly institutionalised discourses of these domains also present important resources for the ongoing production of ethical stances however. Here we are likely to find ethics being negotiated and contested, and more scope for the emergence of oppositional positions. Here too, we can see how principles set down in the codification of ethics are interpreted and contested. Yet because these discourses are emergent and more ephemeral than the strongly institutionalised codes presented in column three, they may provide less secure grip for the researcher in establishing an ethical stance.

The tension between control and contingency introduced at the start of the paper can be seen to arise in respect of each domain of ethics. Each may constitute resources for the construction of ethical positions, and hence resources for the fixing of ethical design. But each can also undermine and unsettle the researcher’s stance. Whilst it can be seen to be the researcher’s duty to gain an understanding of the strongly institutionalised codes of these domains in developing an ethical stance (as not to do so might be regarded as a lack of foresight or preparation), it is not possible to predict all the contingent events may arise during research. The weakly institutionalised, contingent occurrences that arise in respect of column two are therefore more problematic in introducing the unexpected. This is not to say that strongly institutionalised codes cannot also be destabilising however. As they need to be identified and interpreted they also have the potential to unsettle the ongoing production of ethical stances.

Fig. 1 provides a way of marking out the competing discourses that can inform and destabilise the production of localised research ethics. The framework focuses attention on the moves that researchers make in the construction, maintenance and articulation of their own ethical stances, presenting a way of thinking about the localised destabilisation of such stances as emerging from different domains. These domains are, of course, inter-related. Some concerns, such as the legal issues that researcher’s may need to take account of in respect of their work, may seep into different domains (in institutional regulations, academic discussion, website rules and regulations, for example). The connections between these different contexts also raise important methodological and ethical questions. What relationship might be traced between the ethics of the researcher and the ethics of the researched settings, for example?

This framework recruits a distinction between theoretical and empirical fields of research presented in Dowling and Brown's (2010) conceptualisation of the research process. These authors' focus attention on the dynamic moves that researchers make in the production of research between the empirical phenomena that constitute the researcher's focus of interest (which they term the empirical field), and the theoretical antecedents (of the library etc) that constitute resources in the development of research questions and analysis (the theoretical field). The emphasis on the productivity of dialogue between the empirical/theoretical fields in their framing of the research process has informed my conceptualization of the development of ethical stances in research, as similarly involving entries into, and moves between, different domains. (The theoretical field can be seen to be represented by the ethics of the academy, whilst the empirical field is represented by the ethics of the researched). My framework extends their scheme however, by drawing attention both to the researcher's own ethics - which shape the researcher's moves between theoretical/empirical fields - and the ethical discourses of the institutions that frame the production of research.

Although each of these domains can provoke the destabilisation of the researchers' ethical stance, my interest in the rest of this paper is on setting contingencies - contingent events arising from within the empirical contexts of research. This is because these are perhaps most likely to introduce the unexpected during the ongoing conduct of research. I want to consider the way that researchers may find themselves engaged with stabilising (research) activity in the face of setting contingencies by turning to my own experience of carrying out research in online environments, research that involved both establishing a specific ethical stance and efforts to maintain/amend this stance in the face of empirical developments.

LOCAL/UNSTABLE ETHICS IN THE STUDY OF ONLINE FAN ACTIVITY

I experienced the instability of research ethics first-hand in my own work during an observational study that I carried out of two Internet-based fan groups between 2004 and 2006 (see Whiteman 2007). My research explored the day-to-day activity on the bulletin boards of two sites, Silent Hill Heaven (SHH) and City of Angel (COA). The project examined the relationships that members of these sites developed in relation to the settings, to each other, and - perhaps most importantly - to the objects of fan interest (the videogame series *Silent Hill*, and the television series *Angel* respectively; see Whiteman 2008, 2009). I was particularly interested in the patterning of authority and identification that was evident within members' online exchanges, and how the avatar identities of participants were constructed and maintained within these interactions.

My research was based on textual analysis of written exchanges on the forums of these sites and did not involve moves to contact or meet the offline avatars of members of SHH or COA. This methodological approach was rooted in my research problematic; my interest in how relationships/identities were established, maintained and destabilised within the technologically-mediated interactions on the sites, rather an interest in the relationship between members' online/offline activities and identities. The study used a number of events as critical cases to explore this establishment/maintenance/destabilisation, including COA members' responses to the cancellation of *Angel* and screening of the final episode of the series in the US in 2004, and

SHH members' reactions to the release in 2006 of a fourth *Silent Hill* game and *Silent Hill* film. They also included events relating to the running of the sites, such as the closure of the COA forums, the hacking of SHH (which I return to below), and internal struggles on the forums, such as responses to 'deviant' posters within forum activity.

The study was characterised by a number of key ethical decisions relating to the nature of my involvement with the settings and my collection and handling of data from the sites. These included the decision to carry out unannounced observation in COA and SHH (visiting the sites daily and reading/collecting posting activity without disclosing my ongoing observer-position and not posting on the site); my decision not to anonymise the sites or the users of the settings in writing up my research (although I did not share any of the personal information available on the site, such as email addresses, or real names); the use of varied archiving strategies to capture verbatim interactions; and the dissemination of the work (including the decision to email my thesis to the owner/members of SHH after the completion of the project).

The observational identity I adopted (as a lurker rather than participant) and my use of data from the sites was founded on an objectification of the activity within COA and SHH as being situated within the public domain and hence – I argued – of legitimate focus of academic attention without informed consent. This definition of the sites as housing published, publicly accessible textual material was established both in relation to the substantive features of COA and SHH and in relation to the strategies that Internet researchers have developed for defining the public-ness of online environments: specifically, discussion of the distinction between technical definitions of openness and perceived privacy (King, 1996; Frankel and Siang, 1999; Bakardjieva and Feenberg, 2001; Elm, 2008). Informed by this work, I examined the "technical" openness of the sites, focusing in particular on the lack of passwords to gain entry to the parts of the sites I was looking at, and gained a sense of the "perceived" levels of publicness of the settings through a prolonged engagement with the sites which enabled me to develop an understanding of the attitudes towards lurkers and sense of audience evident within posting activity (see Whiteman, 2007). My objectification of the sites as public was therefore fuelled by varied evidence from the environments – involving a look towards both the regulative aspects of the settings (the way that entry was policed, the openness of material) and the way that involvement in the activity appeared to be understood by members of the sites in their online postings.

At the same time, in developing my methodological approach to these sites I also drew from a broader range of other theoretical resources from within the ethics of the academy. This included the specialist literature on the nature of covert observation in research (eg Homan, 1980; Bulmer, 1982; Herrera, 1999; Calvey, 2008), the ethical guidelines of the *British Sociological Association* (paying close attention to their guidance on covert observation in public settings), and antecedent studies of online communities and gaming/fan cultures. I established connections with work that had taken similar approaches and asked similar questions to my own (e.g. Chin and Gray, 2001; Hills, 2002) whilst also engaging with qualitative studies of online environments and games/fan studies research that had taken different methodological approaches and emphasised the use of participant observation and value of insider knowledge (e.g. Tulloch and Jenkins,

1995; Steinkheuler, 2005). The difference between this work and my own proved helpful in refining the aims of my own project, as well as establishing the ethics of my study as different to those presented in such work.

The stance I initially established can therefore be seen to be principally the outcome of an engagement with the ethics of two domains: the ethics of the academy and the ethics of my research settings. The nature of my entry into, and recruitment of evidence from, these domains in establishing my ethical stance was also influenced by my own personal ethical commitments. Despite the apparently distanced observational approach that I was adopting in my research, this involved an identification with the fans that I was researching, which arose largely from my shared “fannish” interest in the fan objects of these sites. As I began my study before the introduction of a Research Ethics Committee at my University the project did not go through formal ethical review. This meant that the ethics of my institutional context bore less direct influence on the study than they might if I were to embark on the study today. However my stance was also shaped by ongoing discussion with my supervisor, as well as by more formal institutional feedback (at the point of Upgrading for example).

The outcome of my engagement with these different domains – my decisions in respect of the design and conduct of my project - were challenged a number of times at conferences and seminars when academics critical of my lurking position questioned my research actions. It was possible in the face of these academic contingencies to explain/defend the decisions I had made in reference to the ethics of my setting and the ethics of the academy (as I have done above). As my work proceeded however, aspects of the stance that I had established were to be challenged and destabilised by events that I could not have predicted at the outset of my research.

UNSTABLE ENVIRONMENTS

The first type of challenge related to structural and organisational changes that COA and SHH underwent during my study. These led me to question the ‘fit’ of my working definition of the sites, demanding a re-framing of the approach I was taking and a re-assessment of the status of the settings and my collection/use of data from within them. Although the changes did not prove extremely problematic to my research, they served as clear reminders both of the need for practical response to ethical issues in light of changing research contexts, as well as the dynamic nature of the public/privateness of online environments.

My work in COA and SHH began within technically “open” public settings. I ignored any gated spaces that required registration or a particular level of status for access. Between 2004 and 2006 the status of the forums of these public areas changed however, with previously “public” areas of both these sites closed off to the public via the introduction of a requirement to register and log-in to access parts of the boards.

COA privatised their entire forums in this way in June 2005, forcing a reconsideration of the way I handled the data from the site. As a registered member of a site, these forums remained visible to me. The question was then whether I should approach this activity in the same way as I had approached earlier interactions on the forums. Different arguments could feasibly be made in addressing this question. Focusing

on the technical openness of the setting - and depending on how you defined “openness” - it would be possible to argue either that the site was now closed off or that it was still open-access. Despite the new requirement that visitors register, for example, the site remained relatively public as any individual with an email address was able to become a member, and hence gain access to the forums.

When first defining the status of these sites however, I had considered both the technical openness and perceived privacy of the settings. In responding to this development I tried to be consistent with this earlier approach. The act of closing off the site, I felt, involved an asserted shutting out, the construction – in Goffman’s terms - of a “soundproof region . . . where only members or invitees gather” (Goffman, 1963, p. 9). For this reason I decided to treat the posting activity in these newly privatised areas of the site as if it was now private, separating data collected from this point onwards from my existing archive. Although I observed some of the activity in this region (although my focus was by now on the analysis of the data I had already gathered) I did not cite any of the activity from this time in my thesis. SHH followed in 2006, privatising a number of parts of the forums and making them inaccessible to non-members. As with my approach to COA (and for the same reasons), when I generated data from these areas I archived them separately. My focus remained on data gathered from the public domains of the site and I did not include verbatim extracts of this newly privatised posting activity in the reporting of my research.

UNCERTAIN RESPONSIBILITIES

These structural changes to the organisation of these sites affected the methods that I used when collecting and handling data, and influenced the ways that I used the data in the reporting of the study to a limited extent. These changes were less serious than a more dramatic event, the hacking of SHH in 2005, which was disastrous for the members of the site, and provided a dilemma for me, challenging the non-interventionist (and non-disclosed) position that I had taken up until this point.

From the beginning of my research the posting activity within SHH and COA had been unstable. When I started observing COA in 2003 the forums were arranged into three main boards – one for general discussion, one for discussion of the series, and a board for help/questions relating to the site. After the cancellation of *Angel* these forums merged to form one basic message board that integrated different topics of discussion into a single list of threaded conversations. This board contained a limited number of threads. As new threads were started, older ones were pushed off the board (and, as far as I could tell, were not archived). Although in early 2005 the forums were re-organised and divided into a range of more sophisticated bulletin board system, subdivided into seven forums, this meant that for a time potential data was lost each day if I hadn’t archived it.⁷

⁷ This expanding the focus of interest into consideration of other “Whedonverse” texts such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Firefly* and *Serenity* (each of which created by Joss Whedon, the creator of *Angel*). As well as restructuring the site, new features were introduced – including a “who is online” feature that displayed a list of the registered users currently logged onto the site (myself included).

The “fleeting” permanence (Foot and Schneider, 2004) of online environments evident on COA was also evident on SHH, even though this site archived posting activity and housed a more sophisticated bulletin board system early on. In 2005 a ‘spring clean’ of the SHH forums (referred to on the site as a “forum flush”) deleted a significant number of threads from the site. This happened while I was visiting a colleague in the U.S., and so I missed the event, coming to it only after the clean had taken place (trying to work out what had happened, and assessing what might have been removed). From this point on, the importance of archiving the posting activity in order to ensure the durability of data was clear and I started maintaining a more complete archive of the site.⁸

In 2005 SHH’s website was attacked by hackers and the entire posting history of the forums was lost (see Whiteman, 2007). The hacking of SHH proved a crisis point that provoked consideration of my relationship to the site and responsibility to its members. My archive meant that I was suddenly in a position to be able to help the site’s inhabitants. Yet to do so would involve breaking with my non-intervention with the setting. This event pushed to the foreground an aspect of my ethical stance that had remained in the background up until this point; namely, my identification with members of the setting. Up until the hacking I had not felt any conflict between the observational position I was adopting in my professional capacity as a doctoral student carrying out online research, and my personal relationship to the activity I was researching. Now, however, the distress experienced by the site brought this allegiance to the foreground. I wanted to help if I could. The decision was therefore not a difficult one to make. I decided to contact one of the owners of SHH by email to see if they wanted a copy of my archive. I told them about my project and we exchanged a few emails, I requested their address to send them the archive and did not hear back (later I was told the owner had not received my last email). SHH re-launched shortly after and activity built up again very rapidly. Soon the archive I held became almost redundant, with the lost history replaced by forums that were once again bustling.

INSTABILITY AND ETHICAL LEARNING?

What did these events teach me? On a very basic level, the changes to COA and SHH provided first-hand experience of changing nature of technologically-mediated environments and the need to develop flexible strategies for archiving data in online qualitative research.

The events also provoked a reflection upon and development of a more complex sense of what it is to be a lurker online, fleshing out what was to me initially quite an abstract notion of what it might mean to sustain such a position. When I started my research my sense of what it was to be a “lurker” was ill-defined. I assumed that it would be possible to adopt and maintain a distanced observational approach, as I was conceptualising the activity as textual interactions (rather than as involving human subjects). I didn’t really

⁸ At this point I started using archiving software to create an archive of the sites (see Whiteman, 2007)).

consider the participation and identification that can be involved in being a non-participant, or anticipate the ways that the lurking observer might suddenly find themselves in a position where they could do something to help their research site. I am not arguing here that lurking is unethical, or an observational identity that is impossible to sustain. However my experience of observing activity over a prolonged period of time gave me a sense of the potential challenges of sustaining distanced, “textual” approaches to the study of online activity. In my case these challenges came from my growing identification to the sites, my inability to control the contingent nature of these settings, and my (difficult-to-avoid) imaginings of the human subjects involved in the observed activity. By refining and problematising my understanding of what it might mean “to lurk,” this experience also developed of my understanding of the ethics of the researcher – as constituting an ethical domain that involves multiple affiliations, commitments and allegiances (both professional and personal) that can inform the production of research ethics in different ways and that can develop and change over time.

The decisions I made in adapting my ethical stance in response to these events - both in my handling of data in the newly privatised SHH and COA and my response to the hacking of SHH - were relatively easy to deal with. This was partly due to the timing of these contingent events, which took place after I had accumulated a large amount of data and was moving towards a focus on analysis rather than data collection. If my interaction with the owner of SHH had involved a rejection of my presence from the setting, for example, it would not have been disastrous for my study. If the events had occurred earlier it may also have been possible to try to seek consent from participants to observe their activity within the privatised forums of these environments. And yet my continued observation of the activity would then have depended on the response of the owner/the site’s members. This suggests that the timing of contingent events in respect of the lifecycle of the project is significant, as it can lead to such events being more or less disruptive. Other issues would, of course, be likely to make the researcher’s response to contingent events more or less difficult (including the likely impact of taking no action, and the likely impact on self/researched contexts if action is or is not taken).

The hacking of SHH marked the first of two breaks with my non-intervention with the site. The second was my decision to share my research with the community in 2007.⁹ This action was partly due to my previous interaction with the owner of SHH, which had established an initial relationship (even though this had not been sustained). When I finished my PhD I contacted the owner again, sending them a link to an online version of my thesis. Both my initial contact with the owner and subsequent dissemination of my work to the site was potentially destabilising for those involved in the setting, constituting surprising events for owner and participants. I was aware that news of my study (and the thesis itself) could disrupt the setting: this was one reason for my decision to contact the owner, rather than posting the link directly onto the forums. At the same time it also involved a measure of how the legitimacy of my research actions would be received and judged by those involved most closely with the site. The owner requested my permission to post the thesis on the forums of the SHH, and it was duly interrogated by members of the setting (with 33 members taking part in discussion of my work in the first 3 days it was up). This interrogation included an assessment of my actions by members of the site, a quite detailed examination of parts of my thesis (particularly my representation of

⁹ I did not share my thesis with members of COA - by 2007 the forums of this site had closed.

individual members of the sites),¹⁰ and a discussion of the ethics of my study which echoed, in part, the debates within the ethics of the academy. This included the charge that my study was voyeuristic, but also others that voiced surprise at such responses, arguing that the activity I had observed was situated in the public domain.

CONCLUSION

The four domains of ethics that I have introduced in this paper provide a framework for conceptualising the production of localised ethics in research. They draw attention to the competing contexts that can underpin and undermine the researchers' ethical manoeuvring during the conduct of research. As I have described in the paper, the ongoing maintenance of my ethical stance in my own research involved specific moves into and between the ethical discourses of the academy and the researched settings, and a growing awareness of my own personal ethical position in respect of the fan activity that I was exploring.

Because it focuses attention on the researcher as the site of negotiation of competing demands and values, the emphasis of localised research ethics described in this paper plays a role in re-establishing the expert authority of the researcher at a time when research ethics is being increasingly bureaucratised. This emphasis can therefore be seen to relate to the identities we construct as researchers, and ways we regard ourselves as central to this ongoing ethical work. At the same time, the move towards localisation in ethics does not involve an "anything goes" ethos – or suggest that the researcher's decisions cannot be criticised. Indeed as researchers face increasing pressures to be able to defend their ethical activity both in their publications and in the face of tightening institutional regulation of social science research (for example the relatively recent introduction of ethics committees in UK higher education institutions), the importance of developing informed, defensible ethical positions grows. The emphasis on localised ethics can be helpful in this regard, as it suggests a more refined and considered approach to ethical decision-making than merely applying general principles, one that has been worked through in relation to the different contexts that can shape the production of research.

Yet this localisation is also messier than the application of general ethical codes. I have suggested that researchers entering into the production of ethical stances face a tension between control and contingency. This extends beyond the qualitative, fieldwork based research that has been my focus here. No matter what the nature of the research, we may find that the assumptions we have worked from, decisions we have made, become challenged; they too may be in a process of development. The efforts required in maintaining an ethical position throughout the timeframe of a research project should not be underestimated or ignored.

¹⁰ Posters voiced different responses to my analysis. Some dismissed it – with one voicing their amazement that someone would spend so much time looking at their activities – some stated their pride in the attention the site had received, one suggested that it contained a number of factual errors about the history of the site, with others deciding that the analysis was fair. When a poster stated that they thought the thesis was written by a member of SHH I posted a response stating that I hadn't been a participant and explaining the decision-making behind the project.

However it is in our efforts to maintain our ethical stances that we may learn the most about our research activity.

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