Åsa Rosenberg
Virtual World Research Ethics and the Private/Public Distinction

ABSTRACT:

With rapid development of the techno-social, researchers are constantly facing new methodological challenges. In research ethics, the private/public distinction has often been stressed as a particular problem. Using Second Life as a case, this article attempts to clarify how notions of private and public influence identities, settings, and interaction in virtual worlds. This paper suggests that an increased focus on the type of relations that predominate a particular context can be helpful for determining whether that context should be perceived as private or public. In conclusion, emphasis is placed on the responsibility of Internet researchers and their relation to the development of online privacy issues.

INTRODUCTION

Late modernity is characterized by medial and technological proliferation, which brings about unprecedented changes in spatio-temporal relations (Giddens, 1990; Bauman, 2000). These changes are prominent in relation to the Internet and its associated technologies (Meyrowitz, 1985). Thus far the process of constructing scholarly understanding of online phenomena has been a creative challenge. Though not a clearly discernible discipline in itself, Internet research has given established branches of knowledge an opportunity to reflect on and reformulate traditional research practices (Hine, 2005). According to Markham and Baym (2009), the Internet is directly implicated in four major transformations of our epoch: media convergence, mediated identities, redefinitions of social boundaries, and transcendence of geographical boundaries. Consequently, Internet researchers are engaged in ample boundary work when delineating their projects, approaching online environments, and producing descriptions and explanations. This boundary work has revitalized the discussion about research ethics and brought to the forefront concerns about how conventional guidelines are to be applied online. For example, are avatars preferably approached as human subjects or works of art? Are blogs more similar to news or diaries? Is lurking equal to deception? Are chat rooms public or private? What kind of data can we safely collect without consent?

Internet research ethics (IRE) have, like research ethics in general, partly spawned from previous faux pas. Perhaps more importantly they have been produced in international collaboration by Internet scholars who have based the new ethical frameworks on their personal experiences with online research. These debates haven taken place not only in books and articles but also at conferences and on academic blogs and mailing lists, notably the Association of Internet Researchers listserv AIR-L (McKee & Porter, 2009). In 2002, the Association of Internet Researchers also released their recommendations "Ethical Decision-making and Internet Research" (Ess and the AoIR ethics working committee, 2002). Ethical norms

vary somewhat between academic disciplines and between countries. Despite such differences, some fundamental concerns regarding ethical matters are generally shared (Buchanan, in press). Accordingly, it's thought that researchers should maximize benefits and minimize harm, that people should be treated fair and equally, and that research participants should be treated as autonomous individuals, while those with diminished autonomy should be entitled to protection.

Without reducing the complexity of problems and previous arguments, it should be noted that the private/public distinction is a recurring theme in IRE debates. More precisely, in online contexts, the boundaries between private and public appear blurred (Bromseth, 2002; Löfberg, 2003; Mann, 2003; Thorseth, 2003; Sveningsson Elm, 2009). This makes it difficult for researchers to assess the sensitivity of information and situations, It also makes it difficult to determine when research requires informed consent. Attempts to solidify the private/public status of online phenomena have been made from various ontological and epistemological viewpoints, but arguments tend to follow one of two lines of reasoning: online phenomena can be considered public either (1) if publicly accessible or (2) if perceived as public by participants (Bromseth, 2002; Chen, Hall, & Johns, 2004; McKee & Porter, 2009; Sveningsson Elm, 2009). According to the first argument, online phenomena are essentially public if they can be accessed by anyone with an open Internet connection. Moreover, public discourse must always be open for scholarly analysis and critique, and, in lack of restricted entrance, there is no need for consent or even anonymizing. The second and often counter-posed view holds that, though something may be accessible, the general public (including researchers) may not be the intended audience. Researchers must therefore base their ethical decisions on a community's purpose and participants' expectations of privacy. Without taking consideration to personal privacy, researchers might instigate feelings of intrusion and exposure, or attract unwanted attention to online communities. My description of the above positions is, of course, a simplification. They are ideal types constructed for analytical purposes and do not correspond to two different types of researchers out there. In fact, most research projects will involve careful negotiation between these discourses. It appears that there has been an increased focus on participant perspectives, and I believe this is a move in the right direction. In a time when social groupings are changing faster than researchers can keep up with, viewing the people we study as experts, rather than subjects, is likely to produce more comprehensive and nuanced accounts of online environments. Letting our research be guided increasingly by those we wish to study may also lead our own conceptions to be expanded or even challenged in the process (Stern, 2009).

PURPOSE, SCOPE AND METHOD

Among recent Internet developments is the increased popularity of virtual worlds. These graphical online environments have been described as having "tremendous research potential" (Bainbridge, 2007) and being "petri dishes for social science" (Castronova, 2006). As researchers venture in to excavate virtual worlds, it seems reasonable to take a moment to think about what these worlds represent and how we can approach them most suitably. Virtual worlds also propose an interesting ethical challenge since they, through simulation of space, resemble offline environments more than other online environments previously addressed in IRE. Most of the existing work consists of theoretical arguments or reflections on the ethical problems that people

have experienced in the course of their research. Very little has been done with the specific purpose of producing empirical material that can be used to reason about research ethics online. The purpose of this study is to add to the development of IRE with a case study solely dedicated to the issue of research ethics in virtual words. Rather than trying to attempt an overall review of IRE related issues, I have chosen to define it narrowly in two ways in order to make this study useful for comparison and/or constructive debate. Theoretically, I have chosen to focus my study on the private/public distinction, since it is often brought up as a particular problem in IRE. Empirically, this study is wholly based on data produced through participant observation and focus groups in Second Life during 2007 and 2008. It could, of course, be discussed how far a study on Second Life can be generalized to all virtual worlds. Clearly MMOGs[1] differ in some respects from environments where most content is user created. Yet my hope is that this study will provide "food for thought" for researchers studying any online environment and perhaps for other researchers as well.

This study starts from two basic assumptions, 1) that researchers should avoid doing harm to people, groups of people, and society as a whole, and 2) that making sense of the private/public boundary is important for us to achieve that goal when doing Internet research.[2] The central questions that have guided my research are:

- How do notions of private and public influence interaction in virtual worlds?
- How can researchers work creatively with the ideas of private/public to conduct ethically sound research in virtual worlds?

The analysis that follows is based on data generated from one year of online ethnography and five focus group sessions in Second Life. I found this combination of methods suitable for the purpose since it allows for negotiation between words and action, i.e., what people say and what people do. These methods are used in accordance with previous online (or "virtual") ethnographies (Hine, 2000; Boellstorff, 2008). During this year I spent between 10 and 30 hours per week in Second Life. I had both a broad and deep focus, trying to experience as many different situations as possible but also trying to understand them. For the purpose of this study, a research space was set up in Second Life. The research space was divided into two parts. On ground level was a terrace with generous seating space and a few objects that provided information about my research. In the sky, I had a secret hideout for one-on-one conversations. This place served as a hub for the project though most of my time was spent exploring and participating in different types of events. I visited shops, residential areas, bars, ball rooms, dance clubs, fairs, fund raisers, pickets, schools, fashion shows, art exhibits, concerts, brothels, orgy rooms, churches, discussion groups, and several different fantasy and role play environments to name only a few. I saw a ballet for the first time in my life. I witnessed a Second Life wedding, and a Second Life birth. All chat-logs were saved but rather than assuming it would be possible to analyze one year worth of chat, sequences were frequently cut out and saved in folders organized by topic. Fieldnotes were organized in a similar way. I also took screen captures and shorter film sequences to

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[1] Massively Multiplayer Online Games.

[2] For more information about different types of harm that can be done by researchers in virtual worlds, see Grimes, Fleischman, and Jaeger (2009).

preserve my impression of certain environments and situations. However, I refrained from doing so in situations of a more intimate character and anywhere I assumed people could have taken offense to being recorded.

The five focus groups were hosted at my research space at different times of the day taking peak hours of activity (Fetscherin & Lattemann, 2007) into consideration. Most participants were recruited via public announcements that were posted three days in advance in Second Life's event calendar. A few came as a result of personal invitation and one or two said they heard about it by word of mouth. A total of 83 avatars participated in one or more of the focus groups, but only 51 of these said something more than "hi" and "goodbye." A small demographic survey was sent out to the active participants. The response rate of this survey was 57% (n=29). The survey indicated a slightly higher offline age and more women (65,5%) in the sample compared to Second Life Virtual Economy Key Metrics (Linden Lab, 2007). Online age was somewhat higher than that reported by Fetscherin and Lattemann (2007) but was well spread between young and old.

Since my analysis rests equally as much on participant observation as focus groups, these differences should not be of major concern for the validity of findings. However, something that may limit the generalizability of the results is that all communication in this research project has been in English. The implicit exclusion of non-English speaking populations was reflected in the survey with 82% of participants residing in Canada and USA.

The study has not involved deception. I have made it clear that I am a researcher in my Second Life profile and stated it in chat whenever possible. Early in my research I attempted to create an additional avatar that did not indicate that I was a researcher. I did not use it for two reasons. First, even the slightest amount of interaction made me feel like an imposter. Second, I realized that my identity as researcher attracted people and this significantly aided in collecting and understanding research material. Focus group participants were informed that the discussion was being recorded and was going to be used in research. They were also given additional information about my research through an object called a "notecard." Quotes have been edited by moving and removing certain parts and spelling errors have been corrected to increase readability. I am referred to by my Second Life first name "Kid" in the quotes but all other names have been replaced.

It should be noted that I will not be discussing legal matters in this article. When I speak of privacy, I speak of it as fluid cultural phenomena rather than the codified norms that are privacy law. As I believe it to be a large enough topic to deserve an article of its own, I have also chosen to exclude any reference to Second Life's terms of service. The desires and perceptions of people are what I have sought and what my analysis concerns.

PRIVATE/PUBLIC IN THEORY

The private/public distinction has long been a central theme in Western thought. Within a wide range of contexts, it has served as a tool for analyzing and advancing political and moral debate, developing social

policy as well as ordering everyday life (Weintraub, 1997). The terms private and public have never gained a solid state, neither in social theory nor everyday language. In addition, the private/public boundary is often perceived as fluid. At the same time, we must acknowledge that any conceptualization of these boundaries has a great effect on how we understand social phenomena. In relation to research ethics private/public primarily functions as a demarcation for how we as researchers can and should approach and relate to material, persons, and situations.

Two of the more well known writers in social science that have dealt with the private and public are Erving Goffman and Jürgen Habermas, respectively. They both emphasize one of these spheres but also fail to adequately account for the other (Hansen, 1997). Together however, they illustrate how both the private and public are important for individuals and society, and they demonstrate what functions they serve. Habermas and many after him have emphasized that every democratic state needs a public sphere. The public sphere is that which lies between the government and the private sphere; it is essentially a social space where people can discuss ideas and form opinions (Habermas, 2006, p. 5). In Goffman's (1982) dramaturgical theory, such public space can be described as a stage where we, like actors, always perform different roles. This "face work" is exhausting and the private, what Goffman calls back stage regions, serve as a safe place to where one can withdraw and just be, free from the evaluating and scrutinizing gaze of others.

The characteristics of the private and public implied by the theories of Goffman and Habermas can be made more explicit with the help of Weintraub's (1997, p. 5) two kinds of imagery by which private can be contrasted with public.[3] First, they can be distinguished by visibility; what is hidden or withdrawn versus what is open, revealed or accessible. Second, they differ depending on collectivity; what is individual, or pertains only to an individual, versus what is collective, or affects the interests of a collectivity of individuals. This individual/collective distinction can, by extension, take the form of a distinction between part and whole of some social collectivity.

While they are in theory opposites, one should be careful not to treat the private/public as a simple dichotomy. Such reductions tend to obscure the depth and breadth of the very everyday life practices that weave the private and public together (Hansen, 1997, p. 169). As Gal (2002) points out, the criteria we deploy when constructing private/public boundaries are not dualistic, but recursive and fractal. For example, a bathroom is more private than a living room, but a house containing both a bathroom and a living room is also more private than a city. Additionally, the private/public status of some spaces change. If we invite some people over for a party our living room is clearly more public than it was the night before when we were cuddling with our life partner on the couch. Thus the type of activity happening and the type of relations between people taking part in it strongly influence whether a particular space, in a particular culture, at a particular point in time, is perceived as more public or more private.

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[3] A more elaborate matrix of the relationships between public and private can be found in Warner (2002:29-30).

PRIVATE/PUBLIC IN SECOND LIFE

Through a graphic user interface, virtual worlds offer people all over the world entrance to three-dimensional simulations of space in which they with the use of a virtual self-representation (avatar) can engage in a diverse range of activities with each other. Some virtual worlds supply a preferred trajectory of interaction; others like Second Life allow for more diverse pursuits, and a large part of the content is produced by participants.[4] Virtual words stand out compared to other online environments, because they simulate visual space.[5] It has already been noted in IRE that private and public spaces can and often do coexist within the same Internet arena (Sveningsson Elm, 2009). It is crucial to recognize that virtual space is heterogeneous, and, though the fundamentals of it have been provided by designers, it is equally constituted by the presence of human agents. Indeed, all space is at least partially the product of social structures and performances (Featherstone, 1990; Lefebvre, 1991). This is particularly so in user created environments such as Second Life, because they allow people to easily modify space according to their desires.

Since anyone with sufficient computer power and Internet connection can join virtual worlds, one could, based on the accessibility criteria, argue that they must be perceived as public (McKee & Porter, 2009, p. 15). However, as my analysis here will show such an assumption would be complicated by the fact that many Second Life residents express a desire for privacy in terms of private places, private conversations, and private information.

Private Places

For many Second Life residents, a home serves some similar functions as material world homes do. By buying or renting a plot of land and placing on it some kind of building that resembles a house, Second Life residents create a "place of their own," a place to be alone, change your clothes, be creative, spend time with family and friends, or have sex in. For these reasons, virtual homes are not merely "pixels on a screen." In one's virtual life, they satisfy the human need for the "back stage region" Goffman (1982) has discussed. They can further be described as spatial representations of the self. Material world restraints prevent us from always being logged in to the virtual world. Virtual homes can to some extent compensate for this by creating a sense of continuous presence. In this sense, they are not just places to withdraw to, they are part of our virtual identities. The following quote is from a segment of the focus groups where we discussed feelings of intrusion,

> Kid: Do you think houses are private for example?
> Stacy: Yes, houses are private

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[4] There is, of course, much more going on in virtual worlds such as World of Warcraft than simple game play; development and maintenance of friendships and romantic relationships and various forms of creative pursuits, for example. Still, the degree of influence participants have over the environment makes a difference on what types of social formations are possible.

[5] As Boellstorff (2008, p. 247) points out the development from "2D web" to "3D web" entailed an addition of online places to online networks which means that virtual worlds are primarily *places*, not networks (though one could, of course, propose that networks of individuals are interacting in such places).

Aika: Yes, houses should be private if they have doors and walls
Cherry: Yes houses are private
Joan: Kid, anyone who goes into someone's house without invitation [would be intruding]
Gail: Kid, people can lock their houses if they want them private
Willa: Houses are usually considered private - many have shields keeping people off the land

Virtual homes are most often perceived as private, at least by those who have spent a sufficient amount of time in Second Life to be "immersed," i.e., accept the virtual world as a reality. Such an interpretation is sometimes enforced by the use of "ban lines" that permit access only to certain avatars. Another way this is enforced is through scripts that eject unwanted visitors. There are also entire game regions that require membership in a particular group to get access. Second Life also allows for objects to be unaffected by gravity, which has enabled the phenomena called "skyboxes" (homes, work spaces, and clubs that are built in the air to keep them out of view). Some Second Life residents also express a concern that, despite the technical tools provided, lack of privacy is a recurring problem. A tale that I have heard many times exemplifies this: a "newbie" shows up at your house naked, simply wandering around, asking for directions to sex sites or interrupting private conversations.

At this point, some may respond (as a few people in my focus groups did) that, though there may be a desire for privacy in virtual worlds, there is no actual private space in Second Life since the technical interface does not allow it. Even though avatars may be kept out with ban lines and trespassing scripts, someone could always move their camera angle out of their avatar and into a space to which they do not have access. Using this technique one could, to some extent, observe people without them knowing. However, research ethics (or any other ethics for that matter) cannot reasonably be based solely on what can be done. As Ellen put it "I think people will treat their houses as private spaces, regardless of how easy it is to move your view inside." Knowing that one could be observed is something that may modify one's behavior in terms of what kind of activities one engages in and where. In this sense, privacy is a matter of freedom.

It needs to be noted that a "home-like" structure in a virtual world may not in every instance need to be considered off-limits, at least not if it is empty and there are no virtual equivalents of a "keep off sign." Though there seems to be a fair consensus on homes being private, a few informants stated that they consider their homes open to all or that they would allow people to use their homes when they are not themselves present. However, as Saint said in another discussion, "places obviously treated as homes by the owner should be respected as in RL [Real Life]." Such obviousness requires that a researcher is sufficiently familiar with the environment to interpret interactional codes and norms in harmony with other users.

Private Conversations

Homes are generally considered private, and, in this regard, they are unique. They are the only type of space that people repeatedly mention, and the only type that there is a strong consensus about. However, there is one more thing that several informants refer to as private. It is not a space, but a form of communication. There are many different ways in which people communicate in Second Life. There is open text chat, voice

chat[6], and generic and customized avatar sounds and movement. These are proximity based, transmitted to anyone whose avatar is close enough to your own (within "chat range"). There are also group messages, which is a form of one-way communication where representatives of a group send out notifications to its members. Finally, there are instant messages (IM). IM refers to exchange of text messages through an interface that is separated from visual space. IM can be done in a group but the term commonly refers to conversations involving only two people. Since IM transcends space, it is used to communicate when one's avatars are in different parts of the virtual world. However, it is also used by avatars within chat range of each other in different types of settings. For example, if you see two avatars standing next to each other in a mall looking at clothes but that are not seemingly communicating in any way, they are probably "in IM." It is not uncommon that people engage in different conversations at once. If you notice that someone participating in a meeting suddenly gets quiet, they may, for example, be talking in IM with one or several people. IMs are also frequently used when trying to approach someone in a personal way. If you have an attractive (female stereotype) avatar, you shouldn't be surprised to receive flattering comments in IM now and then from random people you encounter. In essence then, IM makes it possible for people to initiate private conversations or move talk out of public view. Ping explains:

Kid:	Yeah, private would be skyboxes... and such or?
Ping:	Yes private would be skyboxes
Ping:	along with other things
Ping:	the time you spend with friends is also another one
Ping:	and also if you have a partner here
Kid:	So let's say you are in a mall talking to a friend, that would still be private
Ping:	Yes because you'd be doing it through IM

As such, IMs are, according to some, at least intended to be private. But the tension we saw in relation to homes between wanting privacy and not knowing if you can have it gets stronger when discussing IMs. The notion that nothing is really private online is pervasive. I have had several informants describe to me (in educative/caring manor) methods by which information about people can be collected without them knowing. For example, someone could turn the camera sound off in their viewer and take screen shots of you without you knowing. When discussing a robot that allegedly can read people's IMs, several informants contend that, though something may be intended to be private, it would be foolish to assume it is.

Kid:	Hehe, I just meant that it seems a bit scary if someone can read our IMs
Sona:	Nothing is private anywhere, Kid
Sona:	somewhere, someone can read them
Emmet:	Safest to assume it is all public
Saint:	Think of Prince Charles and the Camilla transcripts
Paige:	It seems to me... that everything in SL is available...
Kid:	Or do you folks think of IMs as public also?
Dayny:	I think IMs are supposed to be private?
Marcus:	IMs aren't public, but they are accessible to the game masters

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[6] Voice chat is also available as group and one-to-one. Voice was added during my fieldwork, but the use of it was not very well spread. The addition of voice to Second Life is quite a complex issue, and I do not address it in this article.

In the quote above, note that Saint draws a parallel to a famous event taking place outside of Second Life,[7] thus suggesting that even in "real life," one can never be certain of one's privacy. This reminds us that privacy is not only a scarcity in virtual worlds, but also, according to some theories, becoming scarce in Western society as a whole (Lyon, 1994).

Private Information

In Second Life, most people tend to draw a fairly strict line between their virtual and their offline selves. Few divulge in their Second Life profiles who they are in "real life," and most people say offline friends or family would not be able to recognize them by seeing a picture of their avatar. Sharing information that would enable you to identify someone offline is something that only happens occasionally, and it is usually only done after a long period of getting to know one another. But the fact that the risk of inflicting harm to others' offline identities is small should not confuse us in to thinking that avatars are simply some form of publicly displayed artifact.

When we enter Second Life for the first time, we are, despite previous experiences with avatars and virtual space, newbies. As newbies, we do not know where we are, how to get from one place to the other, or how to modify our appearance. If you see someone standing in a shopping mall in his or her underwear, or even naked with arms stretched out in a position to modify his or her appearance, it is probably a "noob." Either we decide that this is too much and quit, or we eagerly start struggling to become competent Second Life residents. As we gradually become immersed, we adapt to already existing norms and begin co-constructing them. Among other things, we learn how to move around without bumping into other people and how to avoid undressing in shopping malls.

When we start perceiving our avatars as virtual representations of our selves, we develop a virtual identity. Avatars aren't simply possessions, they are the faces with which we meet people, the bodies with which we dance, give virtual hugs, or walk in demonstrations. They are what signify to ourselves and others that we are real (Boellstorff, 2008, p. 129). As such, they are equally and, indeed, exceedingly part of what Goffman has called "the territories of the self" – a preserve to which an individual can claim "entitlement to possess, control, use dispose of" (Cohen, 1997).

When discussing what is perceived as intrusion of privacy, several participants mentioned other avatars sitting on their avatars or standing too close to them. As a reminder to other users that one wants to be treated with respect, some Second Life residents state in their profiles that "avatars are people" or that "behind every avatar is a real person." I encountered the following sign at the entrance of a gothic/medieval store: "PLEASE PUT YOUR HUMAN ON. Inside every avatar is a live person, trying really hard to get out. The castle is virtual; emotions and feelings are not. Respect this rule and be welcomed as a friend."

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[7] The Prince Charles-Camilla transcripts refers to a phone conversation between Prince Charles of England and the duchess of Cornwall that was assumed to be private, but was, in fact, bugged. A transcript was published in the tabloids (see Linton, 2006).

Messages of this sort indicate that Second Life residents sometimes experience a lack of recognition as human beings. When discussing informational privacy (Tavani in Ess, 2009, pp. 56-57) with informants, I have found that claims for control of private details differ quite radically between users. Three basic standpoints can be identified in relation to where people draw the line for intrusion or exploitation (c.f. Chen, Hall, & Johns, 2004, p. 159). The first group states that they do not ever want to participate in any type of research without informed consent. The second group holds that researchers may observe and collect data without consent as long as they don't interact or interfere. The third group thinks that it's acceptable to collect information and interact without consent, but they say that researchers must not deceptively develop close relationships with people to gain information. Furthermore, it appears to be a general assumption shared by all three groups that names and quotes are not to be used in research publications without informed consent. Some informants said that, depending on the research topic, they would feel comfortable being quoted with their Second Life names, but, in such cases, they would still want to be notified. Interestingly enough, even though most people appeared uncomfortable with the idea of being manipulated or secretly observed, the importance of researchers needing to work undercover to get authentic data was brought up several times. In a few instances, I interpreted this as an indication that people had secret lives that they would not willingly divulge to a researcher. This raises an issue that has not yet received a lot of attention in IRE. What specifically qualifies as deception in online research, and under what conditions, if any, are deceptive methods acceptable?[8]

Publics with Varying Degrees of Privacy

In my research, the public has been more difficult to distinguish than the private. Although informants would sometimes describe public space as "someplace that looks like a park or mall," it was more common that it was defined as "anywhere it is not declared as private." In this way, public space is generally not defined by what it is, but by what it is not, i.e., "what it is not private." In practice, this would mean that most of Second Life is public (exceptions being IMs and spaces clearly marked as private). This is true in the sense that anyone would be welcome to most places, but, at the same time, most places are so diverse that simply labeling them all "public" would leave us with no pragmatic understanding of how to approach them. In other words, different areas are created in Second Life for different purposes. Moreover, places serve different functions depending on the social activities happening at a particular moment. Boellstorff (2008, 181) suggests that virtual worlds could be "third places" that stand outside the dichotomy of private and public.

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[8] I encountered several researchers in Second Life who proposed or had already experimented with assuming fabricated identities for the purpose of infiltrating cultures about which they were curious but did not know much. I also participated as a subject in two psychological experiments where I did not beforehand receive full information about what the experiment entailed and was afterwards quickly dismissed with a briefing on a notecard without being able to ask any questions.

However, as I have demonstrated, there are situations in Second Life where residents would prefer and do, to some degree, expect privacy.[9]

For a researcher approaching virtual worlds, it may be useful to think of Second Life not as a public place, but as several spatially grounded publics. They are publics not in the sense that they "publish" anything in the etymological meaning of the word, nor are they always tied to any concrete forms of political struggle. They are not all democratically governed, and they do not always allow for the type of rational discussion that Habermas associates with the public sphere. They are publics because they are distinct sites of cultural production (Benhabib, 1992; Emirbayer & Sheller, 1999; Hauser, 1999).[10] As such, virtual worlds as cultures (and the subcultures within them) are legitimate objects of study, but some level of cultural awareness is required to approach them in an ethically sound way.

In a comparative analysis of online versus offline environments Sveningsson Elm (2009) suggests that the concepts of private/public must be conceived of as a continuum consisting of at least four degrees: public, semi-public, semi-private, and private, and that only places that are public or semi-public can be studied without informed consent. Similar to Sveningsson Elm's examples, I have found homes to be considered the most private, and, when the public is described, people most often refer to things like "streets, squares, and shopping malls." However, degrees of privacy between these extremes are still difficult to identify. According to Sveningsson Elm's examples, Second Life schools would be more public than Second Life clubs, but this is not necessarily the case. Some schools are inaccessible to the public and require a particular group membership to access, whereas some clubs are open to anyone 24 hours a day, and vice versa.

I believe a key indicator to further distinguish between private and public contexts is the type of relational form that dominates within it. According to Lofland (1998), three primary types of social realms can be distinguished based on the type of relational form that dominates in a particular physical space. Translated to online environments, the theory states that the dominant relational form of a virtual space (intimate, communal, or stranger) designates whether the social realm is private, parochial, or public. This distinction allows us to consider the changing character of social space. For example, a virtual café may be a public place when populated primarily by strangers, but it turns into a parochial place if a support group uses it for its weekly meeting. Similarly, a place with many regulars (be it a school or a club) would be more private than a place where everyone is always a stranger.

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[9] One might say that they are few, but that would be misleading. Houses are very common in Second Life, and so is the use of Instant Messaging.

[10] Ebirmayer and Sheller (1999) refer to these kind of publics as "civil publics" in contrast to political and economical publics: "Civil publics entail the communicative networks through which members of families, voluntary associations, and religious and educational organizations reflect back upon these institutions [political and economical publics], make decisions regarding them, and self-consciously seek to shape them in concert with others, including through social movements, popular cultures of resistance, and the development of new media or new genres of association and communication." In this sense, Second Life as a whole is also a public among other virtual publics.

We could also think of the public and parochial realms as strange publics and familiar publics. Strange publics are contexts where impersonal relationships predominate, where people are generally unknown to each other. These publics pertain to a general collective, i.e., anyone and everyone in Second Life. Familiar publics, on the other hand, have a more limited audience and are populated by more closely related people. These are places where people who already know each other meet and places that people seek out to find like-minded people.

Thinking of virtual worlds as publics rather than public places does not, by itself, solve any ethical dilemmas. Indeed, most ethical dilemmas cannot be solved once and for all, but must rather be a matter of compromise and careful management. What ethical dilemmas do is open up for increased reflexivity not only about the environments we study but our own place in them. Not long after I had finished building my research space in Second Life, two neighbors came by to greet me. As I explained that I was a sociologist and intended to host discussions, they expressed concern both that I may be inclined to spying on them and that my gatherings would attract unwanted visitors to the area. I was slightly humiliated at the time, but later realized that this incident was just another example of what I was there to study. My presence as a researcher and the infusion of my research space into what was primarily a residential area had nudged something parochial towards the public.

CONCLUSION

Discussions with my informants have sometimes clearly resembled the "public if accessible" versus "private if perceived as such" debate in IRE that I described in the introduction. Arguments alternate between, on the one hand, proclamations of a desire for privacy, and, on the other, the conclusion that there is no genuine privacy online, or anywhere else for that matter. Marking homes and IMs in line with Weintraub's criteria "individual" and "inaccessible" is thus an attempt at creating a sense of privacy in a world where its existence can never be taken for granted. Similarly, keeping offline identity separate from online identity serves as a primary means of preserving personal information, probably because the privacy of one's online identity can never be guaranteed.

I have suggested that, to facilitate deciding how we are to approach a particular online context, it can be helpful to determine what kind of relations that predominate in it. It appears that, in this sense, online life is quite similar to offline life. While we may keep our voices down when talking to a friend in public, we still consider our conversation private. Thus no matter how easy it may be to collect information online, we cannot justify all types of data collection with the simple argument that something has been made public. This is not to say that some information cannot be collected, but it must be collected with careful attention to particular norms and practices. It is not enough to consider whether a space is public, who the intended audience is or whether some information is personal. All three must be considered.

The purpose of research ethics is to increase the ability of research to respect human nature, increase validity of research results, and to better serve society (Sieber, 2001). On that note, I would like to

conclude with the reminder that, as researchers, we are not simply gathering data, but constructing it (Mason, 2002). The development of IRE is part of the production and stabilization of discourse surrounding the Internet. As conceptualizations of the Internet become more concrete, we are, as Markham (2003) expressed it, reifying a box that we will have to think outside of in the future. On these grounds, the relevance of IRE is not limited to particular projects or disciplines. Its relevance extends to the future relationship between academia and the Internet. "Truths" about the Internet disseminated by experts today will, in the long run, have an effect on how society as a whole perceives itself and the Internet in the future. In relation to the development of online norms, we may want to ask ourselves this question: If we support the idea that everything online is essentially public, is it possible that we are, in practice, contributing to what some would call an erosion of privacy? No research can accommodate all interests, and some research may require controversial methods. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that the panoptic character of online environments provides us not only with new research opportunities, but an ethical conundrum.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Åsa Rosenberg received her bachelors degree in Sociology in 2006. Since the spring of 2007 Åsa is a PhD student at the department for Sociology at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden. The overall focus of her PhD thesis is on social structures in online communities. Åsa's primary theoretical skills are within Internet research, feminist theory, criminology and theory of science. She mainly works with qualitative methods and theories concerning identity creation, communication and social hierarchies. Åsa Rosenberg, University of Gothenburg, Department of Sociology, P.O. Box 720, SE 405 30 GÖTEBORG (Sweden), asa.rosenberg@gmail.com

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