

Ethical Issues in Internet Research



Heidi A. McKee
Miami University
mckeeha@muohio.edu

James E. Porter
Miami University (effective July 1)
porterje@muohio.edu

I. Overview: Studying Ethics, Methodologies, and Research(ers)

Our presentation today is a distillation of an extensive, multi-year research project — full results forthcoming in *The Ethics of Internet Research: A Rhetorical, Case-based Process* (Peter Lang, 2009).

The two primary goals for our research are:

- (1) to collect cases highlighting ethical questions and approaches for resolving them in Internet research from both published texts and from interviews with Internet researchers about the ethical issues they have encountered; and
- (2) to provide case-based heuristic tools to aid researchers in analyzing and responding to the various ethical dilemmas they may encounter.

Our methodology is both humanistic (rhetorical analysis) and qualitative-empirical (based on interviews). First, we analyzed published descriptions of Internet research in order to identify the ethical issues researchers face and the processes they use for working through these issues. However, because we saw the need to capture the largely invisible ethical processes underlying the formal published statements, we also interviewed Internet researchers from around the world. We interviewed 30 researchers from 11 different countries (Australia, Canada, Great Britain, India, Italy, Japan, Korea, New Zealand, Norway, Taiwan, and the United States) working in a variety of disciplines, including anthropology, communication, economics, education, gaming, gender studies, information technology, media studies, psychology, rhetoric and writing, sociology, and technical communication.

II. Case-based Ethics: Moving from Ad Hoc Particularism to a Rhetorical and Procedural Approach

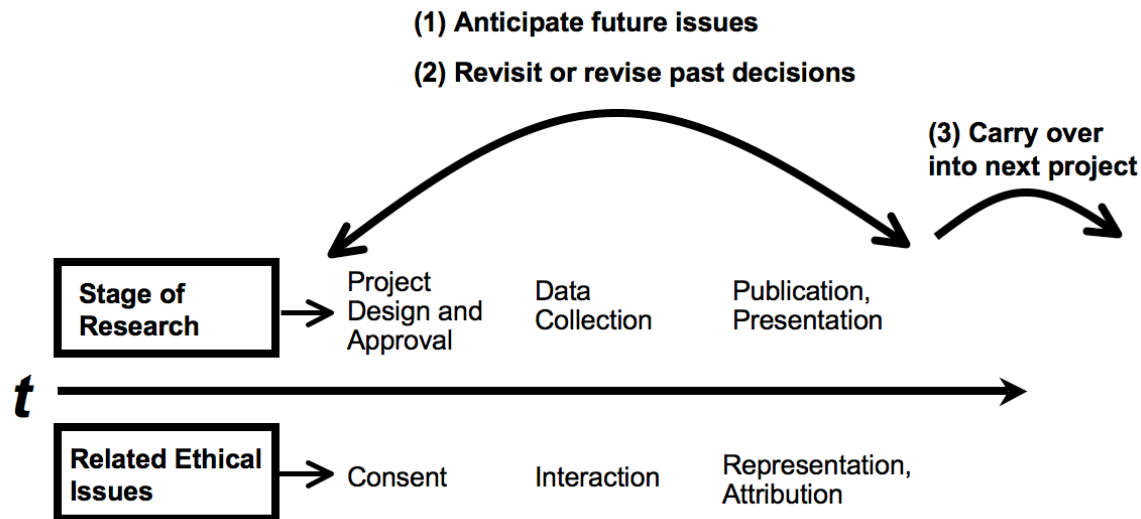
We advocate a systematic, taxonomic, and rhetorical procedure for addressing ethical issues that emphasizes two critical processes: (1) researchers recognize the particular circumstances of each new research case *at the same time* that (2) they situate their case in relation to other parallel cases, precedents, procedural guidelines, and, importantly, community expectations — both the expectations of the community/ies they are researching as well as the expectations of their own disciplinary community/ies.

In our presentation today we will discuss a number of issues and questions, some in more depth than others:

- ▶ Ethics as a recursive rhetorical and methodological process
- ▶ Issues and heuristics for Internet researchers to consider:
 - Audience (with whom to consult?)
 - Research type and epistemological perspectives (space/place; text-based/person-based)
 - Informed consent (public-private; degree of interaction; topic sensitivity; subject vulnerability)
 - Researcher ethos (credibility; variability of roles)
 - Ethical representation (publication in the age of remix, multimedia, and search engines)
- ▶ Ethical responsibilities (to research, to texts/communities, to the Internet)

We hope our presentation — particularly the questions we raise and the heuristics we propose for answering those questions — will be generative and helpful for you. In our discussion, we hope that you will feel free to raise other issues, to provide examples from your own experiences, and/or to discuss the sample cases we provide below.

III. Key Ethical Issues at Different Stages of the Research Process



IV. Research Scenarios

Case #1: A team of researchers is examining the social networking site MySpace to determine to what extent 18 and 19 year-old participants make personal information available to the public through their profile pages. The researchers did not request permission to conduct this research — either from MySpace administrators or from individual MySpace users — as the information they collected was not password protected and was publicly available on MySpace. Should these researchers have sought permission and/or consent from the persons whose data they gathered? How might this determination change based on various data collection and data reporting methods?

Case #2: A male researcher studying interactions in women’s support groups online poses as a woman with physical disabilities and becomes an active member of a discussion group so as to gather data and to study and quote interactions with list members without seeking their consent. Is this human subjects research falling within acceptable parameters for deceptive research?

Case #3: A psychology researcher lurks on a public discussion forum for people with breast cancer. (a) If her analysis focuses on quantifying direct requests for advice and reporting numbers in aggregate, but not quoting, is she doing human subjects research? Does she need to announce her presence, seek consent, etc.? (b) If her analysis involves quoting messages to analyze for markers of individual and family adjustment to living with cancer, does she need to announce her presence, seek consent, etc.? (c) If her analysis involves participating in the discussions and quoting from messages, is she doing human subjects research? Do your responses change if the researcher were instead studying a discussion forum hosted at ESPN for “Fans of the New York Yankees” where writers post their thoughts on the players and the game?

Case #4: A sociologist is studying young adults’ multimedia representations of self in Facebook, analyzing wall postings, profile listings, and uploaded images. He is only accessing sites that are publicly available (i.e., not limited to viewing by friends). In presentations and reports of research he includes quotations and screen captures from Facebook pages, including individuals’ walls. Is he doing human subjects research, or does his research fall in the parameters of Fair Use of published material? Is informed consent needed — and if so, from whom? Facebook? The individual? The “friends” who write on walls? And, if some of the sites he visits are the sites of minors, does this change anything?

Case #5: An education researcher studies learning in the massively multiplayer online game *Lineage*. In her ethnographic research, she interacts with other gamers, both through her avatar and in her real-world identity, sometimes just in passing while on siege, sometimes more extensively (for several years) as guild

leader and as researcher. In the process of researching she collects notes and transcripts on thousands of hours of game-talk and interaction in-world. While the information she gathers as a defined researcher (e.g., interviewing people out-of-world) is clearly research, what of the exchanges and interactions she experiences in various gaming roles? That is, when she is a Princess in *Lineage*, what can she use in her research? How might the inclusion of screen captures or video screen captures affect this determination?

Case #6: A media studies researcher is studying teenagers' and pre-teens' suicidal ideations in blogs at sites such as LiveJournal and Blogger, analyzing the posts for how these writers articulate audience. These blogs are not password-protected. In her research she quotes from the blogs, but changes the names of the blog writers. Is participant consent (or, possibly, participant assent with parental consent needed)? Should she intervene if someone posts a specific and detailed message planning an imminent suicide?

Case #7: A marketing researcher is doing work on Internet popular culture and mechanisms for "going viral." He traces the posting of popular YouTube videos and how and where those videos then get mentioned. His work leads him to discussion boards at fan sites, to blogs by individuals, as well as to more public blogs such as PerezHilton and *The Huffington Post*. When reporting his research, the researcher intends to use quotations and to provide direct links to the various mentions he finds online of popular videos so that the readers of his research can track for themselves the viral pathways. What ethical considerations might he face in his researching and reporting?

Case #8: A writing scholar conducts a teacher-research study of students' multimodal composing, obtaining review board approval for her research and informed consent from students to quote, copy, and redistribute (digitally or via screen captures in-text) their class projects. She writes an article for *Kairos* (an online, open-access journal) and decides to include a video a student made about a car crash and the death of several teens in his hometown. The student received permission from the people he filmed to include their audio/video likeness in his class project, but his permission form mentioned nothing about the video going on the Web. Should the researcher include this video in her web-based publication in *Kairos*?

Case #9: A business communications researcher has been, as a "private" citizen, a long-time participant in Second Life, her avatar is widely known, is active in many groups and charities in-world, and has a great deal of credibility. In part because of her virtual world savvy, she is hired to conduct market communications research by a company that seeks to market in Second Life. Her boss suggests that she would obtain greater consent from people to participate in focus groups if she were to solicit their participation using her long-time avatar. The researcher is uncomfortable about blurring the boundaries of her personal life and her professional work and is unsure whether she should conduct the research using her long-time avatar or if she should create a new one strictly for research. How might she proceed?

Case #10: A team of teacher education researchers creates a text-based avatar called "Jane" to play the role of a virtual student in order to interact with other students in an online graduate course. The researchers' purpose in this deception study is to determine whether the presence of a "mythical student" can help improve the dynamic of online class discussions and to assess how students feel about the ethical issues of instructors' hiding and then disclosing the identity of a virtual student. The students in the class think Jane is another student, and they do not know that they are taking part in a research study. What are the ethical issues involved with deception studies in online spaces? Are they different from f2f circumstances? How does this case compare to case #2 above?

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