

Ethics 2.0: Balancing privacy, publicity and prudence

Maria Bakardjieva
University of Calgary

Virtual Knowledge Studio, Amsterdam, June 11, 2008



Ethics Exasperation

No matter how much we think about and discuss issues of research ethics, we may never be fully able to draw any definite lines or make any definite recommendations.

Research ethics, on- as well as offline, seems to remain a dynamic and unsteady field that defies all attempts at drawing up any definite and overall sets of rules and regulations.

Malin Sveningsson Elm (forthcoming)

Goals for this Talk

- The importance of being earnestly ethical.
- The importance of descriptive ethics: know your research population and context.
- The importance of the relationship researcher – researched.
- The importance of the link between methodology and ethics.
- The importance of asking your research community.
- The importance of taking over your IRB.
- The importance of the categorical imperative: *All research should be possible... and ethical.*



Early Debates on Internet Research Ethics

The Information Society, 12, 1996

- Online forums public or private?
- The technological point of view: some places are simply public by their empirical nature (Park).
- Perceived privacy (King).
- Situated, dialogic agreements that develop over time between researcher and participants (Allen)



The Privacy Knot

- Technical dimension.
- Conventional/norm-regulated dimension.
- Individual or group dimension – perceived privacy.
- Hence – continuum of degrees.
- Hence – always elusive.



The Methodology Factor

- Naturalistic research: the researcher wants to disturb the “natural order” of the research object as little as possible, ideally, not at all.
- Understanding research: the researcher’s aim is to reconstruct the subject’s own view of the world.
- Participatory research: the researcher wants subjects to consciously reflect on the research questions and contribute to the research.
 - **PAR – research is designed with a view to participants’ interests.**
- Critical research: the researcher puts subjects’ performance to a test/judgment under certain normative principles (of equity, fairness, ideological distortion, etc.).



The Bureaucracy Factor

- Specialized institutional bodies tend to develop bureaucratic rigidity.
- The models applied in the work of such bodies do not fit Internet research practice.
- Some types of research are being thwarted by bureaucratic control.
- Research ethics becomes a quasi-legal enterprise.



Later Debates: Emerging Guidelines

Ethics and Information Technology, 4, 2002

- Ethical convergence (of values) and pluralism (of applications).
- National and cultural specifics.
- Plurality of models: social science vs. humanities.
- Subjects vs. authors distinction.
- From dichotomies to continua.



Evolving Concepts

- Accessible engagements and conventional situational closure (Goffman)
- Privacy in public (Nissenbaum)
- Contextual integrity (Nissenbaum)
- Expressive privacy (Schoeman; DeCew; Goldie)
- Harvesting (Sharf)
- Objectification and alienation; (Bakardjieva & Feenberg); objectification and reflexivity.
- Participants' interests (Bakardjieva, Feenberg, Goldie)
- Dialogic affordances (Allen; Bakardjieva & Feenberg)



Objectification and Alienation

With some of the stuff I write, I am uncomfortable thinking it is going to be accessible for a long time but this is after all the Internet and it's hardly private. Anyone can join the list. I try to think carefully before writing things, but then how does one do that totally and share oneself? The alternative, [that is] total privacy is to sit here in my house alone and not communicate. I'd give it about three weeks before total insanity set in.

Mailing list member, 1999



The Non-alienation Principle

The main issue is that when the folks sent the messages which are in the archives, they did not know that their comments might be used for something/ some other purpose. I think it is important for folks to know this upfront when they decide what they will post. I try to provide the folks on the list with some security and confidentiality, and to respect what they have written, so these issues are important to me.

Mailing list moderator 1999

Generational Changes

- Growing awareness of Internet users, ‘street-smartness’;
- Growing skills of users in protecting their expressive privacy;
- Local regulation: articulation of site/forum policies;
- Interaction between users and research/researchers; research on researchers;
- Accumulation of experience in the academic community;
- Development of original techniques for soliciting and obtaining consent & for subject participation in research.
- Research in the users’ interest; research **for** users.



Users as Participants

One thing I wondered about as a possible end-product of research like yours was making a case for funding for Internet access for many disabled people, shut-ins, etc. Pie-in-the-sky vision, of course, but if it could be shown that people used less medical care and fewer ER visits and saved gobs of money by having the support and info from the Net, who knows what might happen?

Mailing list participant, 1999

Are you planning to include some of the negative effects of online communities in your study? Now, I should clarify that I am a very independent, sensible individual, with no addictive tendencies, and a very strong marriage (believe it or not!) which is why I think it's important for you to look at these other aspects of online communities. It can affect *anyone* this way."

Web forum participant, 2002



Researching the Researchers: Example

If you look at the links you will find the professor is into a study of group dynamics, with one objective to develop software to make the newsgroup experience more user friendly.

It seemed to me that they could have got all of the information needed from the archives without telling anybody, though that would be using the data for a purpose other than it was collected for. I do not know how American law treats this. If the data was to be genuinely untraceable to source we would have no way of knowing.

Most researchers are aware that knowledge of being surveyed, and of the purposes of that surveillance, changes the behaviour of the surveyed. I wondered if telling us was a ploy to see our reaction.

Having researched the professor's background. it appears he is genuine on his motivation, and the exercise might have benefits, perhaps major ones, for the future.

Researching the Researchers: Example (cont.)

The professor is leading the study.

His co-workers include Dr. Maria Bakardjieva, some quotes from her:

“Born in a south-eastern corner of Europe. Battling for ground in western North America. Raised under communism. Converted to cosmopolitanism. Likes to talk with people. Likes to theorize. Loves a good laugh. Tries to be profound. Tries to be productive. Tries to be popular. But seriously,...”

and:

“In light of this formulation of the meaning of virtual togetherness, I question the dichotomies between the private and the public, on one hand, and virtual and real community, on the other, that are at the roots of both virtual utopia and dystopia.”

I get good vibes here too.

Newsgroup participant 2002



Web 2.0

- Participatory architecture.
- User-generated content.
- From interpersonal and group interaction to interactive broadcasting.
- New dynamics of objectification and alienation.
- Bloggers, Facebookers, YouTubers, Second-Lifers.
- **Ethics 2.0?**



Internet Research as Social Practice: Descriptive Ethics

- The Researchers: Discussion on the AoIR Mailing List, March 6-12, 2008
 - 70 messages
 - 29 participants – mostly from the US, but also from Australia, Canada and India
- The Subjects: Focus groups with bloggers in Calgary, Canada, February-March 2007.
 - total of 18 bloggers participating

The Bureaucracy Factor

There are multiple reasons for which I think that going on the academic job market doesn't make sense for me right now. The major ones are:

1. IRB/human subjects. I am a huge supporter of ethics in research, but my experiences with IRBs (at multiple universities) have been nothing short of miserable. I feel extremely claustrophobic right now because of it. I will save the details of my anti-IRB rant for another time, but the short synopsis is that I think that IRBs are destroying social scientists' ability to do good qualitative research and ethnographic research in particular. In theory IRBs are about ethics; in reality, they are about protecting universities from being sued. Qualitative (and especially ethnographic) research is seen as risky because it's not controlled and structured and formulaic. I do not believe you can do true ethnography under an IRB and it depresses me to think about all of the data that I've collected that I cannot use in my dissertation because it didn't fit into an IRB-approved protocol. I'm told that not all IRBs are as bad as the ones that I've faced, but "not as bad" is not good enough right now. I want to do research that is guided by ethics, not institutions.

dannah boyd, September 2007,

http://www.zephorias.org/thoughts/archives/2007/09/22/why_i_am_not_go.html



The Bureaucracy Factor

For a student project they insisted that we get the names and addresses of discussion forum participants who were being 'interviewed' through the forum - so that we could send them a statement saying we wouldn't use their names and addresses.

Marj, Dr Marjorie Kibby, The University of Newcastle, Australia

In fact, the U.S. guidelines for IRBs are so vague that they clearly invite absurdity.... There is far too much anecdotal evidence suggesting that the guiding principle for many, if not most IRBs in the U.S. has shifted from the federal guidelines to covering the corporate backside from litigation.

Mark D. Johns, Ph.D, Luther College, Decorah, Iowa USA

Bureaucracy Factor (cont.)

IMO, there has been too much hang-wringing and lawyering up over online research - and **could make a lot meaningful research impossible. This is particularly ironic in the face of the data collected by businesses.** At some point you have to give things over to the professional judgment of the scholar. This is not to say the IRB process is not important - I just think it has gotten WAY out of hand in the social sciences and humanities.

Ted M. Coopman, Department of Communication, University of Washington

The Bureaucracy Factor Fix

As for the issue of your IRB's understanding of online research, I agree many do not understand, but as educators and members of the academic community **it is up to us to educate them.** I've done my part at IU and I have seen our IRB gain understanding of the unique and not so unique issues surrounding this work. Remember that any new venue for research has the same set of underlying issues...**you have to teach your audience what questions to ask** so they understand how to think about what they are receiving.

You can educate them by writing up a well reasoned and articulated research protocol, by meeting with leaders in the organization, by asking to present your research to the full committee, and **by becoming a member of the IRB.** Remember that most major university boards in the USA have graduate student members...you might have to ask the application process but they are out there. **No quicker way to educate the IRB community about internet research then by working from the inside out.**

Lois Ann Scheidt, Doctoral Student - School of Library and Information Science,
Indiana University, Bloomington IN USA



Methodology Factor

The key distinction that you need to deal with right now is... **are you dealing with the people? or are you dealing with documents?** If you are going to talk [to subjects] or participate in the community, ... or intervene in any way ... then you are dealing with people. ... So, what i'm saying is... your methods determine the ethics you must follow, **define your methods.**

Jeremy Hunsinger



Disciplinary Pluralism

Doing my Diss in the literary studies department this was accepted without further discussion, i guess because - basically - the author-as-an-individual-subject is not a category given much consideration.

So if I am speaking about the "Blogger" I am talking about a textual subject. Still textual subjects obviously have a lot to do with who and what we are and definitely deserve protection.



The Privacy Knot

My personal opinion is that it is fine to not get informed consent when dealing with data that was clearly posted online in a completely **public setting** (as opposed to in a **community that requires registration**). However, I would think about the **sensitivity of the data** and **desires of the authors** when deciding whether or not to use actual usernames and direct quotes from the postings. For example, if the **intended audience** to the content was clearly a small group of friends and not the "world at large" then I would likely not use actual usernames and not use large direct quotes (that would be easily searchable and traceable to the individual) in publications unless I had first received permission from the individual. However, **if the content was published to gain recognition and for a large audience**, then I would be more inclined to use the actual username and directly quote from messages.

Derek Hansen, The iSchool at Maryland

Humans, Authors or Texts?

... my position is that **documents are exempt and openly published, searched/archived blogs are documents**, much like architecture and environments in online worlds are documents, much like studying the pen and pencil collection of Charlie would be studying documents. You might need permission of the extant property or copyright holder, but categorically, **you are not studying humans or creating subjects**. ... I don't think we should argue that studying blogs archived on the web and making inferences from their produced textual materials about bloggers in general is any different than when i study books and publications in order to make inferences about the operations of academia.

Jeremy Hunsinger [jhuns@vt.edu]



Contextual Negotiation and Accountability

keep the consent forms handy - **negotiate each instance case by case** by researching how **"private" or "public" features intersect in each unique case...**

there are no absolute generalizations in terms of ethics - I would say - but there **ARE** things like **accountability to the community and people that you are writing about and with - and this determines what ethical behaviour you pursue**

r

Radhika Gajjala

Avoiding Backlash against Researchers

What we have heard from various AoIR researchers (e.g., Bruckman, Ess) is that communities or community members often have an **expectation of privacy**, even when postings are public. Should researchers honor such expectations -- and, thus, probably lean toward seeking formal informed consent?

My sense is that generally, yes, they should -- and not only in the interest of avoiding harm to the participants as a collective but also in the interest of **avoiding community backlash against researchers**. What Heidi McKee and I have seen from our own research on Internet researchers -- and yes, we regard that as human subjects research! -- is that most researchers we've interviewed, and **certainly most ethnographers, are careful to respect community standards and beliefs because *not* doing so potentially impairs future research**. Harm to the researcher (and to future research) is also, I would argue, a part of the ethical decision here.



Perceived Privacy of Bloggers

On 7 Mar 2008, at 15:25, Charles Ess wrote: > bloggers by definition want their material to be read

Coming in on this one a bit late and perhaps I am making too much of what was probably just a passing comment, but I have to take issue with this. It is true that (non-friend/password protected) bloggers are making their material available to be read. But in my own interviews (with 22 personal webbloggers) **their imagined and desired relationships with readers varied widely and a few of them said they had no intention to be read by anyone else when they started.** We need to leave room for the people we study to fool themselves on issues like this (one of the central points of my upcoming thesis in fact!)

David Brake, Doctoral Student in Media and Communications, London School of Economics & Political Science



Researchers as Subjects (Bloggers)

I started my personal blog about five years ago on LiveJournal. **It started as one of those personal accounts meant only for the close set of friends who had all started the blogs with me.** In four years, my blog readership (and subsequent friend's list) had grown to more than a thousand people. **The day I realised that so many people are getting a glimpse of my blog which was still intensely personal - discussion relationships, people, paranoias and peeves - was the day I panicked and completely froze.** I haven't written on my blog since a year now. I have also begun a new 'secret' blog, not giving away my identity as in the earlier one and keeping a low profile, sharing the link only with a few friends and not adding strangers.

For me, as a blogger, especially for personal blogs, the imagination of what constitutes an audience gives me the freedom to write and express the way I want to. Just my small bit

Nishant Shah, Ph.D. Student, CSCS, Bangalore.



Enter the Avatar: Another Ethics 2.0 ‘Can of Worms’

This connects to an interesting discussion I've had in another context, which has to do with whether, when one is **doing research in Second Life, observations of, or interactions with, avatars are observations of or interactions with human subjects**. I'm curious to know what others think.

Thanks,

Sj

Blogger Controversies

Q: Did you have any conversations with any of the victims? And have you received any feedback from any of them?

A: I am not sure I follow the reference to the blogs analyzed in this study as victims. Would you call the subjects of my former book analyzing characters in twentieth century literature, such as Thomas Mann's Hans Kastorp or Albert Camus's Meursault, "victims"? I referred to the blogs as published texts open for analysis and did not deal with or have conversations with their authors.

From an ethical standpoint I found this answer very disturbing, to decimate the writings of 9 living and mostly active writers without the decency of contacting them first is not a very good approach. It is certainly not one that I or any writer that I have met would do.

Once again we are back to the Academic v Trade question. As a Trade writer I am concerned about being on good terms with fellow writers, which apparently is of no interest to Dr Keren and his agenda.

Dr Michael Keren has done little to break down the wall between academia and the real world with his approach.

Blogger Controversies II

Well there's an interesting sort of paradox - that friend of mine from [place and name of friend], he did a presentation last year on, surprisingly enough, cat-blogging, and he found this teen's Live Journal site, and he actually, in this presentation he was giving, and had a screen capture of it, and went over well cause he was talking about, you know, how teens are using Live Journal, etc. He then created a Flash version of the presentation and put it on his website and this teen actually found it because the link was (unknown) enough in the Flash and she was irate that somebody found her blog and how dare you invade my privacy. It's a public web page. What's wrong?

Darrel, 34, learning technology developer and researcher

Contextual Integrity: Who do Bloggers Blog for?

Honestly, my blog is for my family. Like, for my parents, for my mom, just they can keep up with what I'm doing. But also, I'm aware that it's not just my family. I know I'm getting 40 hits a day and it's not my dad clicking refresh. Only 10 of them are my dad clicking refresh.

Jordan, 34, photographer

Bloggers: Descriptive Ethics

See, like, when you refer to an online community, like, I think of it's like a forum, for something where people are just getting together simply to discuss, I can see them having a little bit of an issue with that, but with something like blogs, it's pretty much like personal journalism, right, where it's public, you're publishing it for the sake of being public, otherwise you wouldn't be having it public, so I see no reason why you shouldn't be able to use it. I mean, personally, I wouldn't mind knowing, but I don't think I have any perceived privacy. I know it's public, I know people are going to read it, that's why it's there.

Saul, 25, college student



Bloggers: It's Out There

Saul: I think anybody you find who's actively blogging and actively part of the blogging community knows that it's public and knows that, like, you know, it's out there--

Darrel (interrupting): Outside of MySpace and LiveJournal.

Saul: Yeah, outside MySpace and all that...
(whispers scornfully).



Bloggers: It's Out There But Make a Link

... Maybe just inform, like I really don't see the whole permission thing 'cause I think once you decide to put it on the internet it could be used in any other way, like its not just research, but somebody could print it out and show it to co-workers, somebody could quote out of it and use it in their own blog. I really think that once its out there, it's up for grabs, yeah. **Informing would be nice in that way, if there is anything that's said about your blogging you want to defend it or what not,** which is kind of nice about the bloggesphere right now is that there is a link to your blog like within all the other blogs its very easy to find like find out where people are coming from so...

Trevor (23, student?)



Bloggers: Out There and Out of Control

I mean, its there, ... **everyone in the world could link to it and mess with it**, you know. I find things that I have written in all sorts of funny places. I wrote a funny comment once, a one liner sort of thing, and couple of years later I saw it in someone's signature file on an email list, and I was like: what?... and I searched for it and I found it in half a dozen places all over the internet, ... places I had never been to, people I had never talked to **and I was like, OK, that's creepy, but there is nothing you could do about it..**

Patrick, 37, journalist



Bloggers: Out There and Out of Context

I have the Creative Commons thing too, but I think it **would be kind of ethical to contact the person you are using** for just because like you can take any comment out of context right? And I think that [it is] really **unfair for someone who is writing you know a personal [blog] ... But if this is taken out of context and you are using it in a completely different manner, I don't think its appropriate.**

Connor, website developer



Bloggers: Authorship at Stake

... But **if I am writing about my life everyday**, and you only read one post on my life you could take it and psycho-analyze me and maybe I still love my mother and you know whatever, you know **do whatever you want with it and you can turn it upside down.**

The other thing is because I also, because I do post my writing, my real writing which I would hope to get published in magazines or journals and stuff, which I would get paid for, I don't want that to be taken... So I mean there is a certain amount of like most my blog posts you could do whatever you want with it, it wouldn't really bother me, **but if you copy and paste a little short story, or a poem, it would not make me happy.**

Ross, 22, writer



Bloggers: Rocks and Dinosaurs

Philip: But I mean, [in research] we're making up the whole time, where, for example, the names of the dinosaurs [come], you know? And people find the dinosaurs, okay, this is what it was called, you know, and this is what colour it was--You know they're naming dinosaurs after the guys from Dire Straits. I was just like, that's really way off, you know? So, I just think... You said I'm a rock, so I'm a subject, you know? It's... I have no say, I think.

Maria: But are you happy with it?

Philip: I think in that instance? Yeah, that's fine because I think it's just, it's a piece of information. It's... If it's out there it's already out there, you know? Once it's out there, it's out of my control.



Bloggers: All I was Looking For

Rosalind: I think if you find us on Google we are fair game, unless somebody has set up their site to be private access only... Yeah, I think you hit it, like we are out there, its out there for a reason because somebody has chosen to not make it private. ... **Yeah even if like our blog ended up in your book, at least if we got an email to the affect that you thought about it, that might be really all that I was looking for...**

Josh: Well within the blogosphere the ethics is that you give a hyperlink back to anybody that you quote. I do think you need to attribute that with just **hyperlink**, attach hyperlink back to it. I don't think you need to ask permission ethically.

Bloggers: The Ethical Thing and the Nice Thing

I think the web world, from an academic point of view, I would think that **the ethical thing to do is just to cite it and that the nice thing to do would be to let me know**, you know. It's not necessary by any means. I mean, it is public consumption, right, people can take it and... It should be cited because it's my work in the end, but it'd be nice to know that it was going in somewhere or somebody was going to quote it somewhere or something like that.

Clariss, 24, public relations manager

Spectrum of Positions Recap

- Published and up for grabs (objectification)
- Out of my control (alienation/ ambivalence)
- Can be taken out of context (contextual integrity/anxiety)
- Can be stolen (authorship/intellectual property)
- What should researchers do?
 - Cite
 - Cite and hyperlink
 - Back link provides context
 - Cite and let know:
 - Letting know allows bloggers to ‘defend’ themselves
- The Legal – The Ethical – The Nice



Ethics 2.0: Descriptive and Dialogical

Certainly grad students or people early in their research career shouldn't be making these decisions in isolation. Upthread, Ted offered good advice for that context: **ask your board, ask your Chair and ask the internet research community!**

Rhiannon Bury, Athabasca University, Canada



Shouldn't We All?

- The importance of being earnestly ethical.
- The importance of descriptive ethics: know your research population and context.
- The importance of the relationship researcher – researched.
- The importance of the link between methodology and ethics.
- The importance of asking your research community.
- The importance of taking over your Institutional Review Board.
- The importance of the categorical imperative: *All research should be possible... and ethical.*

References

-
- Allen, C. (1996). What's wrong with the 'Golden rule'? Conundrums of conducting ethical research in cyberspace. *The Information Society*, 12, 175-187.
 - Bakardjieva M., & Feenberg, A. (2000). Respecting the virtual subject: How to navigate the private/public continuum" in M. Mowbray, & C. Werry (Eds.), *Online communities: Commerce, community action, and the virtual university*. Prentice Hall.
 - Bakardjieva, M., & Feenberg, A. (2001). Involving the virtual subject. *Ethics and Information Technology*, 2, 233-240.
 - Bakardjieva M., A. Feenberg and Goldie, J. (2003). "Expanding the notion of ethics: Internet research for users". In Buchanan, E. (ed.) *Readings in virtual research ethics: Issues and controversies*. Idea Group Inc., pp. 338-350.
 - DeCew, J. W. (1997). *In pursuit of privacy: Law, ethics & the rise of technology*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
 - Ess, Charles. Introduction. Special issue on internet research ethics, *Ethics and Information Technology*, Vol. 4.
 - Feenberg, A. (1995). *Alternative modernity: The technical turn in philosophy and social theory*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
 - Goffman, E. (1963). *Behavior in public places: Notes on the social organization of gatherings*. New York: The Free Press.
 - Goldie, J. (2003) *Virtual communities and the social dimension of privacy*. M.A. thesis, University of Calgary.
 - Herring, C. (1996). Linguistic and critical analysis of computer-mediated communication: Some ethical and scholarly considerations. *The Information Society*, 12, 153-168.
 - King, S. (1996). Researching internet communities: Proposed ethical guidelines for the reporting of results. *The Information Society*, 12, 119-127.
 - Nissenbaum, H. (1998). Protecting Privacy in an information age: The problem of privacy in public. *Law and Philosophy*, 17, 559-596.
 - Sharf, B. (1999). Beyond netiquette: The ethics of doing naturalistic discourse research on the internet. In S. Jones (Ed.), *Doing internet research: Critical issues and methods for examining the net* (pp. 243-256). London, New Delhi: Sage.
 - Sveningsson Elm, M. (forthcoming). How do various notions of privacy influence decisions in qualitative internet research? In A. Markham, & N. Baym N. (Eds). *Internet inquiry: Conversations about method*. London: Sage.
 - Schoeman, F. (1988). *Privacy and social freedom*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 135
 - Schoeman, F. (1984). *Philosophical dimensions of privacy: An Anthology*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
 - Thomas, J. (1996). Introduction: A debate about the ethics of fair practices for collecting social science data in cyberspace. *The Information Society*, 12, 107-117.
 - Waskul, D., & Douglass, M. (1996). Considering the electronic participant: Some polemical observations on the ethics of on-line research. *The Information Society*, 12, 129-139.