

QUESTION THREE

How do various notions of privacy influence decisions in qualitative internet research?

Malin Sveningsson Elm

Responding Essays by Elizabeth Buchanan (p. xx) and Susannah Stern (p. xx)

During the last two decades, a new area of research has emerged – one that focuses on social and cultural aspects in the environments we find on the internet. These environments have come to pose a number of questions and challenges for social researchers; one area that has been much discussed is the issue of privacy, and the need to safeguard individuals' right to privacy online.

Privacy is a notion that concerns, among other things, the individual's integrity and right to self determination. The basic idea is that each and all individuals should have the right to decide for themselves what and how much others get to know about them. It is only the information that they choose to reveal that becomes known to others. Examining this idea in the context of culture, it follows that the meaning of privacy may change with different cultural contexts. Specifically, the type of information people want to keep for themselves differs. In some countries, citizens may be extremely concerned about keeping information about personal data for themselves. One example of a country that fits into this category is the United States. There, the issue of privacy has been very much discussed, but mainly focused on information about people's personal lives, and,

not surprisingly, information that may lead to the loss of property. In other countries, citizens may not care so much about what information others get about their family or property, but it may instead be crucial to safeguard information about political activities or sexual orientations and relationships. In this category, we find dictatorships in which political opposition is forbidden, or countries that forbid sexual practices other than heterosexuality that occurs -- and in some countries even more narrowly, within marriage. Still, there may be other countries in which citizens do not experience a need to keep many secrets at all, or in which other things are seen as more important to hide than the ones named above. Of course, we must also allow that for each cultural context, there is great variation in perceptions between citizens.

The issue of privacy is central not only for ordinary people, but also for researchers. Here, privacy can be seen as research subjects' right to integrity and self determination – to decide for themselves what kind of information to share with the researcher and under what conditions. In this way, privacy is closely related to one of the most basic requirements of research ethics, namely what is commonly referred to as informed consent – the principle that states that all research subjects should give their knowledgeable consent to being studied. It is this aspect of privacy that will be discussed in this chapter. Taking the point of departure in existing ethical guidelines, this essay looks at the principle of informed consent and under which conditions it needs to be sought. As will be discussed below, research may sometimes be done without informed consent if the environment that is studied is public. The question posed in this paper is thus: how can we as researchers make sense of the variables “private” and “public” to better judge the appropriateness and ethical soundness of our studies?

First, we look at some of the ethical guidelines that exist today: both for offline and online settings, to see what they have to say about informed consent. Second follows a discussion of the concepts of public and private, and what we really mean when we use those terms. Third, we proceed to look at various kinds of research contexts, both on- and offline, to examine what factors can and perhaps should frame these contexts as public and/or private. We then look at what degree of privacy can be expected in various kinds of places, i.e., if informed consent should be required or not. Most research that has been done hitherto has stopped here. It has often been seen as enough that the research subjects give their consent for the research to be seen as ethically sound. However, in addition to examining place, content should be taken into account, both on- and offline, because if it is sensitive, other considerations become relevant and necessary. The last part of the chapter thus discusses to what degree different kinds of content should be seen as private or public, and consequently, what kind of content should be accepted to study without informed consent.

Ethical guidelines

Different countries have different policies for research ethics. As well, the kinds of organizations that ensure compliance with guidelines also differ. Despite differences in organization, however, the guidelines concern generally the same matters. Regardless of country, the issue of getting informed consent is a central aspect of most existing guidelines for research ethics. Along with hiding the true identity of research subjects, getting informed consent is often seen as a guarantee of sorts that the research is really ethically sound – i.e., if research subjects have given their consent, researchers often feel

no need to think more about ethical aspects of their research. However, things may not always be this straightforward. Sometimes, research may be unethical even though performed with informed consent, and vice versa, as will be claimed in this chapter, sometimes research may not be unethical even though performed without informed consent. Ethical guidelines were created to cover a wide range of situations, but particularly in inductive social research the principles do not always match what we encounter when we go out into the field. In those cases, we may instead have to look beyond the guidelines to see what lies behind them, and at what kind of values it is we are seeking to protect by adhering to them. Sometimes, these values may be protected without necessarily adhering to all predefined rules.

In the ethical guidelines of the Swedish Research Council, the principle of informed consent is covered by two requirements: 1) the informational requirement, stating that the researcher shall, at least in sensitive situations, inform those affected about his or her activity, and 2) the requirement of consent, stating that the participants should have the right to decide whether, for how long, and on what conditions they will take part (HSFR, 1990/1999). Other countries, such as Norway, have agreed upon similar ethical guidelines (NESH, 1999).

Most of these ethical principles were worked out before the advent of the internet. However, the internet has changed not only our ways of looking at social life, but has also made us reconsider questions of how social life is to be studied when it takes place online. Although some principles and methods of qualitative research as we have traditionally conceptualized them transfer to these new environments, others require rethinking and revising. This is especially obvious in research ethics.

When studying online environments, getting informed consent may often be difficult. As I found in previous research (Sveningsson, 2001; 2003), in many internet environments, there are far too many participants online simultaneously to allow researchers to inform them individually. Take chat rooms, for example. New participants can log on and off rapidly, affording impossibly small windows of opportunity for informing and gaining consent for research. If researchers were to post public messages asking for consent every time a new individual logs on, the rest of the users would probably classify the researchers as spammers, get annoyed and treat them the way spammers are generally treated, i.e. filter them out, or harass them to make them leave (Sveningsson, 2001). As a last resort, the users themselves might leave the chat room. In all these scenarios, the research situation would be seriously compromised or even destroyed, as this is not what natural chat room discourse would normally look like. Further, if researchers take the time to write and send private messages to all new participants, there will most likely be very little time left for them to actually observe the online interaction.

In other types of internet environments, it may be impossible for researchers to even contact the users whose contributions they are analyzing. This is the case in, for example, online guest books or discussion groups, where people may have written a greeting or a message without signing it, or only signing it with a pseudonym.

The Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) was founded in the end of the 1990s, in order to be an international “resource and support network promoting critical and scholarly internet research independent from traditional disciplines and existing across academic borders” (www.aoir.org). In 2000, A(o)IR launched a working group,

whose aim was to discuss and work out ethical guidelines for internet research.¹ The publishing of these guidelines (Ess & Jones, 2003; <http://www.aoir.org/reports/ethics.pdf>;) was one important step toward guiding internet researchers in their ethical decisions, (also see previous publications, such as Frankel & Siang, 1999; Allen, 1996; King, 1996). However, there are still (and will probably always be) unanswered questions. This is partly due to the rapid development of the internet. The technology and the online environments have shifted so quickly that what is written one day is some times outdated and obsolete the next. But the rapid development is not all. Even if the internet had not changed at all, it would still be extremely difficult to foresee all possible situations a researcher might encounter online. This is due to the multifaceted character of the internet, which makes it virtually impossible to create guidelines that will adequately cover all aspects. When asking ourselves if our research is ethically sound, as in so many other cases in social science research, the answer will often inevitably have to be “well, it depends.”

Because qualitative internet researchers come from different backgrounds, disciplines, and cultures, their perspectives on research ethics naturally vary. The A(o)IR ethics working group had some animated discussions on this subject. Some of the researchers were extremely careful to propose and follow ethical guidelines as they look currently or traditionally (see for example Bruckman, 2001). Others (see for example

¹ The committee that served in working out the ethical guidelines consisted of: Poline Bala – Malaysia; Amy Bruckman – USA; Sarina Chen – USA; Brenda Danet – Israel; Dag Elgesem – Norway; Andrew Fernberg – USA; Stine Gotved – Denmark; Christine M. Hine – UK; Soraj Hongladarom – Thailand; Jeremy Hunsinger – USA; Klaus Bruhn Jensen – Denmark; Storm King – USA; Chris Mann – UK; Helen Nissenbaum – USA; Kate O’Riordan – UK; Paula Roberts – Australia; Wendy Robinson – USA; Leslie Shade – Canada; Malin Sveningsson – Sweden; Leslie Tkach – Japan; John Weckert – Australia.

Danet, 2001; Sveningsson, 2001) had a more utilitarian approach and argued that existing guidelines had to be measured against the purpose of research.

The diversity of disciplines also meant that the group's researchers sometimes had different ontological and epistemological assumptions about what kind of knowledge was to be sought and how this knowledge could be attained (i.e., with what research methods). For some research questions, it might be reasoned, experimental research design would do the job and yield the information sought, a strategy which would solve all problems with getting informed consent and conducting research that is ethically sound. The problem is, however, that in some other disciplines and research fields, experimental situations would not be seen as satisfactory in providing us with the knowledge we are seeking. This is the case, for example, for ethnologists, ethnographers or anthropologists conducting naturalistic inquiry. From these approaches, researchers study people's actions and interactions in their natural online contexts, to explore meanings, describe culture, and so forth. Does the problem of getting informed consent then mean that naturalistic researchers would have to abstain from doing such research, despite the knowledge it would give us? This was the vital point in many discussions of the ethics working group, and no absolute consensus was ever reached.

Finally, the committee agreed upon a recommendation that collecting research data without informed consent could sometimes be acceptable, if a) the environment was public and b) the material was not sensitive (see also the ethics working group's final report in Ess & Jones (2003) or at <http://www.aoir.org/reports/ethics.pdf>). However, the variables of public/private and sensitive/not sensitive are not as unambiguous as they may

seem at first glance. They both require problematizing and further discussion, and this is what the rest of this chapter will focus on.

Defining public and private

When discussing issues of privacy and publicity, our first task is to define what we mean by the concepts. What is to be considered private and what is to be considered public?

According to Thompson (1994), in Western societies, since the medieval period we can distinguish two senses of the public/private dichotomy. The first one has to do with the relation between the domain of institutionalized political power and the domains of economic activity and personal relations which fell outside of direct political control.

Thus, says Thompson (1994, p. 38), “from the mid-sixteenth century on, ‘public’ came increasingly to mean activity or authority that was related to or derived from the state, while ‘private’ referred to those activities or spheres of life that were excluded or separated from it.”

It is the second sense of the public-private dichotomy, as defined by Thompson, which has relevance in this discussion. According to this sense, ‘public’ means ‘open’ or ‘available’ to the public:

... what is visible or observable, what is performed in front of spectators, what is open for all or many to see or hear or hear about. What is private, then, by contrast, is what is hidden from view, what is said or done in privacy or secrecy or among a restricted circle of people. (Thompson, 1994, p. 38)

How does this apply to online environments? What is to be considered open and what is to be considered hidden, when and for whom, and under what circumstances? Let us start with a look at the places where online interactions take place.

Public and private as a continuum, not a dichotomy

The first question we have to ask is which online environments are private and which should be considered public. A first step can be taken by asking questions to enable a deeper understanding of the contextual environment in which one is researching. Possible questions include: How exclusive is the environment? Is it possible for anyone to access the content, or is any form of membership required? If so, is membership available for anyone, or are there any formal requirements and/or restrictions as to who and how many are allowed to become members? Is it not even possible to become a member, but is the content restricted to those with an invitation and/or a personal relationship with the creator of the content? These questions can give some information as to how public, i.e. how open, the environment is, thus providing us with guidelines for how to act.

If we start to compare environments, we will probably discover that we are not faced with a dichotomy, but rather with a continuum where several different positions are possible between the variables private and public. A first conclusion is then that there are different *degrees* of private and public. A more nuanced way of categorizing might be: public, semi-public, semi-private and private environments. Here, we can use the same kind of variables as was suggested by Patton (1990) when describing the degree of openness in participating observations. There, an open observer is known by everyone, a partly open observer is known by some but not everyone, and a hidden observer is not

known by anyone at all. Applied to specific internet environments, we then get the following structure:

1. A public environment is one that is open and available for everyone, it is one that anyone with an internet connection can access, and that does not require any form of membership or registration. Public online environments can then for example be represented by open chat rooms or web pages.
2. A semi-public environment is one that is available for most people. It is in principle accessible to anyone, but it first requires membership and registration. In this category we find most web communities, or social network sites such as for example www.lunarstorm.se or www.myspace.com.
3. A semi-private environment is one that is available only to some people. It requires membership and registration, and it is even further restricted by formal requirements preceding membership, such as belonging to the organization that created the online environment. Examples in this category are companies' and organizations' intranets.
4. Finally, a private online environment is one that is hidden or unavailable to most people, and where access is restricted to the creator of the content and his/her invited guests. In this category we find for example private rooms within chat rooms, online photo albums, or the areas within web communities where the sender specifies who is allowed to access the content, for example only those that are classified as "close friends."

There are also some web sites that allow users to adjust the settings of their accessibility. For example, in livejournal or myspace, a person can make certain information available to everyone, or can adjust the settings so that only ‘friends’ can access it. In this way, some sites are in some sense individual-controlled, and not just site controlled.

Looking at public/private as a continuum may help to clarify what kind of place we are dealing with, but on the other hand it also makes ethical decisions and delimitations even more difficult. This illustrates a complication in the recommendation made by the ethics working group that researchers should be guided by examining whether an environment is either public or private. This decision may be more difficult than it would seem at first sight, because online environments may not fit so neatly into just one of the polarities. In practice or by design, the online environment in question may not be only public or private but something in between.

Researchers may instead focus on a slightly different question about their ethical path: is the environment *public enough* for us to study it without getting informed consent? Of the four different positions listed above, the first one is then clearly public enough to study without informed consent. Hence, we can study individuals’ and organizations’ web sites, online newspapers and web shops without informing the users (although it may of course still be considered good manners to do so)². Studying environments from the fourth, entirely private position without informed consent is clearly unsuitable, or even illegal, and is also further complicated by the fact that we would probably not even get access to the site in question. If we want to study people’s

² However, as will be discussed further below, even though the site is public, it may still be too sensitive to use without seeking consent.

private e-mails, online photo albums and private chat rooms, informed consent is an absolute necessity.

However, the second and third positions listed above are more complicated, and we may encounter problems in deciding whether semi-public and semi-private environments are public enough for us to study. This is partly due to their character of being on the one hand open and accessible for anyone or to some, but on the other hand first requiring membership and/or registration. But it is also partly due to the complex structure of many of the internet environments that can be described as semi-public or semi-private, which are often multifaceted and where several different communication modes and arenas aimed at interaction co-exist at the same site.

More than a decade ago, Allen noted that our conceptions of public and private can be blurred because both types of spaces can exist within the same internet arena (1996). This is the case in web communities, in which users can choose between several different arenas in which to interact. There may for example be bulletin boards, discussion groups and chat rooms that are closer to the public end of the continuum, and personal profiles, guest books and diaries, which may be thought of as closer to the private end of the continuum. Other internet environments may be compounded in similar ways. This mixture of different arenas under the same “umbrella” makes it difficult, as well as possibly unwise, to decide whether the environment in its entirety is public, semi-public, semi-private, or private.

Public and private as a perception, not a fact

The multifaceted character of internet environments is of course a problem for the researcher, but may also be a problem to the users. In some cases, the fuzzy boundaries between private and public parts of online environments may make it difficult also for users to grasp the gradual transition between private and public spaces. According to this view, people may perhaps not be aware of the fact that their actions and interactions may be observed by other people, even perfect strangers. Or even if they are aware of the publicness of the arena, they may forget about it when involved in interactions. It can sometimes be that even if a certain internet medium admittedly *is* public, it doesn't *feel* public to its users. For many users, the anonymity in terms of lack of social and biological cues that CMC provides may encourage a less restricted, more intimate communication than would be the case in offline contexts (Lövheim, 1999). As we found in previous research (Sveningsson, Lövheim & Bergquist, 2003), writing e-mail or a message to a Newsgroup or chat room *feels* like a more private act than sending the same message to other kinds of public fora, and it is easy to forget that the message may sometimes be stored and retrievable for a long time afterwards. Furthermore, what is not easily available now may become easily available in the future – as happened when Google bought the Usenet archives and made them searchable and easily accessible years after posts were submitted.

Another important issue to bring up is that even if users are aware of being observed by others, they do not consider the possibility that their actions and interactions may be documented and analyzed in detail at a later occasion by a researcher. If the content was created for one certain audience and context, the transmission of this content to other contexts may upset the creator (Walker, 2002). This raises a crucial question;

namely, for whom is the content created, and to which audience is the content intended or directed (this will be discussed somewhat below)?

The above examples demonstrate clearly that social researchers are forced to grapple with at least two different views of privacy: one view is based on how easy it is to access the site and the other view is based on how private users *understand* their contributions to be. Early ethical discussions in qualitative internet research mostly implicitly dealt with the first of these definitions: if the medium is accessible to the public, we might assume that it is also perceived as a public place (Sudweeks & Rafaeli, 1995). This assumption is highly problematized and we thus see a shift in thinking toward acknowledging the importance of and further exploring the latter definition (e.g., Sveningsson et al., 2003).

Using offline guidelines for online research

For researchers, one solution can be to look at the characteristics of the parts of the environment we wish to study. In some cases, the conclusion will be that only some parts of a specific web site are public enough to study, while we have to exclude others. Here, we can get guidance by comparing the environments with their offline equivalents and looking at what existing ethical guidelines have to say about studying these. In some occasions, these guidelines can be transferred to their corresponding online environments.

Starting with the first public position above, the offline equivalent comprises streets, squares and shopping malls in city environments. Here, at least Swedish ethical guidelines state that it is allowed to collect data without informed consent, under condition that no individuals are identifiable (HSFR, 1990/1999). The Norwegian

equivalent to the Swedish Research Council expresses similar views: it is allowable to collect data in public places without informed consent, but only without making any audiovisual recordings of the material, for example by videotaping people's interactions on a street (NESH, 1999). Again, it is important to note that ethical perspectives and guidelines vary widely by country. As for this position, the recommendations of the AoIR ethics working group coincide with those of existing guidelines.

The offline equivalent of the second semi public environment above might include libraries, schools and hospitals. Here, it is more difficult to draw lines between what is acceptable and not to study, because different parts of the environments often have different characteristics. In order to do participant observations in a school cafeteria, for example, no informed consent is required. However, if one is to study class room interaction, permission is required from at least from the managers and teachers of the school. The same goes for studies performed in health care institutions, wherein most activities are considered, if not private, at least strongly sensitive. In order to conduct social observation research in health care institutions in Sweden, one has to apply for permission from a specific ethical committee. However, the suitability of doing research also depends on what the object of the study is, and, more important, who is under study. During the 1960s and 1970s, quite a few studies were done where the researchers gained entrance to mental hospitals and other institutions in order to study aspects of them (see for example Goffman, 1961). These studies were seldom if ever preceded by any applications for permission either from managers, staff or inmates, but the researchers gained entrance under false premises and did participant observations that managed to capture the essence of the everyday life of these institutions. Had they informed about

their research, it is not likely that the studies would have yielded the same results. In this and similar cases, the mode of procedure can be defended by the object of disclosing bad conditions in society and emancipating people whose agency was otherwise restricted. Since then, however, guidelines have changed and the legal limitations of Institutional Review Boards (in the United States) and their equivalents elsewhere can hamper this sort of research now.

The third position above, semi-private environments, has offline equivalents in the form of clubs and companies. As with the semi-public environments, some elements may be accessible and allow for observations without informed consent, while others may require it. Within many semi-public and semi-private environments, both on- and offline, there are spheres that count as, if not private, at least something that resembles private areas, and which require more consideration from researchers and observers. One example of this kind of research is found in Svensson (2002), who studied gay communities and gay men's presentations of self. Svensson was known as a researcher to some of the people within these communities (i.e., her informants, whom she interviewed) but not to all them (i.e. all the other visitors at clubs and parties). We can thus conclude that the parts of the study that concerned informants' private spheres required informed consent, whereas the spheres that were more general and concerned publicly observed gatherings did not. As we can see, research in semi-private environments often falls into Patton's (1990) middle position, whereby observers are partly open. This multi-faceted and complex character is by no means restricted to online environments, but is also found in various offline environments.

Finally, the offline equivalents for the fourth position of private environments might be represented by the private home. It may be unnecessary to state that studying any such private environment requires informed consent.

Looking at geographically/physically-oriented rules and regulations and applying them to internet research, we thus see that data collecting without informed consent can be acceptable in certain environments that can be considered public. However, as has already been noted, researchers of internet must make additional considerations for the perceptions of the people who are under study – if they feel the arena is public or not. We may also have to consider the nature of the content, and this will be discussed more thoroughly in what follows.

Considering content as well as context

Having stated what kind of places may be public enough to study, the next step is to look at the content. Not only do we have to consider whether the places we wish to study are public or private, but we also have to consider if the content of the communication is. It begins with a seemingly simple question: What kind of content can be considered public enough to be studied without informed consent?

One way to go in answering this question could be to take our point of departure from Thompson's first definition of the concepts public/private, mentioned earlier. According to this definition, 'public' is a matter of activity or authority that is related to or derived from the state, while 'private' refers to those activities or spheres of life that are excluded or separated from it. Public content would then be content that concerns societal matters, while private content concerns individuals' private lives as separated

from societal matters. Using this definition does imply the advantage of keeping us from making un-ethical decisions, but on the other hand it also excludes all studies of people's interactions online unless they concern societal matters, such as for example discussions on politics and economics at a strictly general level. It would, however, become impossible to study people's everyday lives and everyday interactions as expressed online.

A second way of examining this issue is in conceptualizing along another continuum of different degrees of public/private. At a first level, we have what is public in Thompson's sense, i.e. content that concerns societal matters.³ We then proceed across levels of increasingly private matters, moving from a macro to a micro level, concerning fewer and fewer people and moving into what we typically call private spheres.

Still a third option for considering this question is to bring in the AoIR ethics working group's concepts sensitive/not sensitive. One would assume that people in general would not speak about sensitive matters of their lives in public, while matters that they consider not sensitive they can share with the whole world (to the extent the world is interested in knowing about these matters, of course). However, using the concepts sensitive/not sensitive may be problematic too, because people do not necessarily think of sensitive matters as more private than nonsensitive ones. During the last decade, we have come to see what was once private made increasingly public. What started as talk show confessions, reality TV and docu dramas, where ordinary people's private lives became the subject of TV entertainment, broadcast in prime time national TV, developed into a formidable universe of confessions and exposures of private (in the sense of sensitive)

³ Although in repressive regimes this could be private – for instance certain kinds of political discussion in some nations can result in prison sentences.

matters in public. In personal web pages, personal profiles at web communities and social network web sites, and blogs, we see a good deal of personal information being exposed in public. People write and publish their online diaries, accessible for anyone with internet access, they provide personal information, including full name and real life address, and they even share pornographic pictures of themselves with people they meet online (Daneback, forthcoming). In his book 'Liquid modernity', sociologist Zygmunt Bauman suggests that, while theorists such as Jürgen Habermas feared the public would colonize the private sphere, what we see in today's society is in effect an inversed process where it is rather the private that is colonizing the public sphere:

The 'public' is colonized by the 'private'; 'public interest' is reduced to curiosity about the private lives of public figures, and the art of public life is narrowed to the public display of private affairs and public confessions of private sentiments (the more intimate the better). 'Public issues' which resist such reduction become all but incomprehensible. (Bauman, 2000, p. 37)

The colonization of the public, says Bauman, is due to a process where individuals to an increasing extent are made responsible for their lives – in short, individuals have no one else but themselves to count on to make decisions and choices to make their lives more successful and satisfactory. And should anything in their lives turn out to fail, they have no one else but themselves to blame. This concerns all aspects of life, from matters of career and wealth to fitness and health. Media and other public surfaces are filled with individuals, speaking as private persons about their private matters. These individuals,

says Bauman, offer themselves as examples, if not as counsellors who can advise others. By watching or reading these examples, the audience can on the one hand get some guidance on how to deal (or some times rather not to deal) with their own life situations, and on the other hand, get a sense of not being alone with their private problems after all.

This exposure of private matters in public space has made people think differently about the way public space is to be used. As Bauman (2000, p. 40) puts it:

For the individual, public space is not much more than a giant screen on which private worries are projected without ceasing to be private or acquiring new collective qualities in the course of magnification: public space is where public confession of private secrets and intimacies is made.

To judge from this, what may seem private/sensitive to an observer is not necessarily apprehended so by the individual who exposed the content. Many scholars have found this. For example, in my study of a Swedish web community (Sveningsson, 2005), the users' practices suggest that they do not consider their personal pages, including personal profile, diary and photo album as specifically private. For example, they often put out 'ads' in the more publicly visited spots of the web community, where they urge people to come visit their personal pages, to watch and comment upon their photos and diaries and sign their guest books. Not only do the users seem to be aware of the risk of having their material observed by others – the attention from others is often what in effect is sought. There are strong indications that users tend to see the web community as an opportunity for public exposure, something that is further supported by social welfare secretaries who

have been doing field work among young people at the web community in question (Englund, personal communication). According to these social secretaries, some users seem to see online environments as their chance of getting their 15 minutes of fame, and furthermore, these users are often influenced by the content of reality TV and docusoaps, where extremely intimate matters are frequently and prominently displayed. On the other hand, this discussion could also very well be turned the other way around: what is seen as public/not sensitive by the researcher may in some cases be seen as private and/or sensitive by the people who use the online environment.

In this virtual jumble of potentially private and sensitive material, what *is* then acceptable to collect? Who is to decide whether a specific communicative act is to be seen as public/not sensitive or private/sensitive? This is reminiscent of literary theorists' discussion of where the meaning of a text is to be found. Is it in the text itself? Or does it lie with the text's creator? Or, is the meaning, as more postmodernist thinkers claim, to be found within the eyes of the beholder, i.e., is meaning created first when interpreted by a recipient?

How we reason in these questions may also have some influence on what decisions we think of as ethical. But in the end, unless we ask, we cannot know how the creator of online content apprehends it, we can only judge whether *s/he seems* to be seeing it as public. For those who believe the meaning resides in the text *per se*, the preferential right of interpretation will always be with the observer/interpreter. This may be suitable for those who believe that meaning resides within the recipient as well, unless

they go ask an audience about how *they* classify the content (and even there, different audience members may hold differing opinions).⁴

Another consideration here is that some content may not have been intended to be public in the first place, but was published online anyway, either by the user him/herself by mistake, or by someone else as a prank or as part of bullying or harassment. This was the case in a previous study of a chatroom, where content was published by mistake (Sveningsson, 2001). Observations were made, including occasions when statements intended to be “whispered” (i.e., sent as private messages to a chosen recipient) were transmitted by mistake to the whole public chat room. This often led to amusement for the other users, and some friendly teasing and mocking was likely to follow, which undoubtedly was part of the local colour of the place (see also Cherny, 1999). Nevertheless, this kind of material was excluded from the analyses because it was seen as (too) private.

There are other, similar examples, such as photos or videos published as pranks or harassment, a practice made simple with the built in cameras on mobile telephones. At the same time, this and similar customs also seem to have increased people’s media literacy and general awareness of being observed. In general, informants say, nowadays young people tend not to do anything at all in public that could be experienced as embarrassing, in case someone is carrying a mobile phone with a camera (and in contemporary Sweden, virtually everybody under the age of 30 is).

⁴ At first thought, using an independent audience as a method of deciding the meaning of the content of web pages might sound odd, but it has in fact been done, for example by Karlsson (2001) when classifying various genres of web pages.

We thus see how the concept of social control takes one step further with the technology. Maybe that we, as Bauman says, are not any longer afraid of Big Brother, but this example suggests that we instead have come to fear an infinite number of little brothers, who spy on us and make their findings known by others, such as parents and teachers, but perhaps more annoyingly, to our friends and lovers and people we would like to impress. During the last years, we have seen an increasing number of signs in for example the dressing rooms of public swimming baths prohibiting the use of cameras, something that was not even thought of before the advent of mobile phones with in-built cameras. Practices surrounding mobile phones with in-built cameras have also been told to have consequences for people engaging in extramarital affairs. One example tells the story of a cheating young woman travelling abroad and having no idea she was being observed and photographed by friends of her boyfriend, who then sent the pictures they had taken with their mobile phones to him. The boyfriend received instantaneous proof of the infidelity, whereupon he called his girlfriend on *her* mobile phone, asking her what the heck she thought she was doing.

Media literate people in contemporary Sweden are well aware that what they do may be instantaneously known by others, not only with the simple mouse click, but even easier, with the send-button of a mobile phone. Of course, this affects our conceptions of private and public. Interestingly, we may have just resigned ourselves to think of everything and anything as potentially public. We have become accustomed to being exposed and seeing others exposing themselves to the extent that we may not even expect or care for any privacy online anymore.

To return to the question at hand, in the end, it is important to realize that our efforts to simplify the notions may be misguided. The discussion on public/not sensitive versus private/sensitive content further complicates the matter. The conclusion has to be that matters of public and private content *are* extremely complicated. No content is ever either private or public, but potentially both, depending on who you are asking.

Further, in attempting to make sense of the notions, social researchers must consider the intended audience for an individual's online expression: Even those who are comfortable making all their contributions public may still resent their use as a topic of research. One first recommendation may therefore be for researchers to be reflexive about the object and process of research in an attempt to assess who is judging the publicness of the content in the specific study: is it the researcher, the creator or the audience? Secondly, who is the intended audience? The answers to these questions may very well affect our views of whether the research is ethically sound or not.

Another alternative could be to start to think differently about the whole thing, perhaps even deconstructing the entire notion of private/public. Brin (1998) for example offers a different way of thinking about the notion; instead of privacy, he argues, the focus should be shifted to "accountability". Instead of struggling with problems of who is defining the publicness of certain content, we can instead look at our role as researchers, to assess whether or not we are doing any harm by using a certain material.

This is neatly concluded by the Swedish Research Council in their basic principle "the claim for individual protection." This claim summarizes their ethical guidelines in the sentence that people who participate in research must not be harmed, either physically or mentally, and they must not be humiliated or offended. Taking this claim to heart is a

way, as was suggested in the introduction of this chapter, to look beyond ethical guidelines to see what values we are seeking to protect. Making sure that our research subjects are not harmed, humiliated or offended, it may not always be necessary to follow single rules and regulations exactly.

Conclusion

The issue discussed in this paper is how we can make sense of the variables private and public to better be able to judge the appropriateness and ethical soundness of our studies. The point of departure was taken in the recommendations given by the Association of Internet Researchers' ethics working group. According to these, it can sometimes be accepted to collect and use research data without getting informed consent, under the condition that the environment under study is public and that the content is not sensitive. However, as we can see, it is vital to problematize these concepts.

Our first conclusion deals with the fact that the concepts of public/private cannot be seen as a dichotomy, but must be conceived of as a continuum. In other words, there are several different degrees of privacy and publicity. The paper therefore suggests the use of at least four different degrees: public, semi-public, semi-private and private. The recommendations of the ethics working group could then be further specified with the recommendation that places that are to be studied without informed consent must be either public or semi-public.

A second conclusion concerns the fact that internet environments are multifaceted and are often compounded by several different types of communication modes that permit different degrees of privacy. Here, one recommendation is to look at the

characteristics of the specific parts that we wish to study and look at what degree of privacy they permit before we decide whether it is suitable or not to collect data.

As for the matter of the degree of publicness or privateness, we deal with considerably more difficult questions of classifications and delimitations. This is complicated by the fact that many recent media genres focus on exposing people's everyday private lives in public. We seem to have become accustomed to more and more of such content in public media, possibly resulting in an immunity towards such content. It appears to be increasingly acceptable to expose oneself and one's private matters in public, at least it is done considerably more often now than 10 years ago when confession TV and reality soaps were relatively new phenomena.

When it comes to issues of whether certain content is to be seen as public or private, I admit that even after almost ten years of research on this issue, I find I am unable to take a clear stance -- I am just as irresolute now as when I started to think about the issue, if not more. In many ways, my indecision as a social researcher makes sense; we all probably have different notions of whether a specific content is public or private, and that what is seen as sensitive and not sensitive is a clearly individual question. This conclusion does not make it easier to make decisions; however, it makes it necessary to rethink our implicit views of who is to judge whether a certain content is to be seen as sensitive or not.

There are also other questions that could be discussed and further elaborated, that relate to what we have discussed in this chapter. We could for example discuss questions of whether the appropriateness of collecting and using online data differs depending on who the sender is and in what capacity s/he is communicating. Such questions may vary

well have implications for what decisions we make in our research. A publicly known person may not be able to expect the same consideration of his/her privacy as an average ordinary person. But who is to be considered a public or private person and under what conditions (i.e. when)? And how does one proceed if one does not know who the sender is? This concerns various questions of identity: the role a sender adopts when communicating, the category or authority that is called upon in the context in which s/he speaks, and also the problems we may encounter when we do not know the age or the mental condition of the people we study.

We could also further discuss questions of audience– both the intended and actual one. As mentioned above, we may sometimes be faced with having to make delimitations due to the fact that material that was never intended to be exposed in public may be published online, with or without the depicted person's knowledge. There are also situations in which material intended for a specific context and audience is transferred to other contexts. This may sometimes change the way the material is interpreted, or as Månsson & Söderlind (2003) acknowledges: a photo that could in some contexts appear sexually explicit could in another context appear quite innocent, and the other way around.

No matter how much we think about and discuss issues of research ethics, we may never be fully able to draw any definite lines and/or make any definite recommendations. Research ethics, on- as well as offline, seem to remain a dynamic and unsteady field that defies all attempts we may do at once and for all drawing up any definite and overall sets of rules and regulations.

Recommended reading

To learn more about the cultural variations in ethical approaches to social research, examine the governing documents, country by country. In the United States, the Belmont Report is considered a foundational document, whereas in Norway and Sweden, the foundational reports are the NESH report (1999) and the HSFR report (1999), respectively.

For multidisciplinary and international discussions and methodological advice about ethics and privacy, the AoIR report is highly recommended as a starting point (*Ethical decision-making and Internet research. Recommendations from the aoir ethics working committee*. Available (2006-01-30) at: <http://www.aoir.org/reports/ethics.pdf>).

For more specific case studies and method-specific approaches and guidelines, I recommend Elizabeth Buchanan's edited collection (2004) *Virtual Research Ethics* (Hershey: Idea Group Publishing), as well as her edited special issue of the *Journal of Information Ethics*, which outlined key perspectives. Additionally, all of the members of the AoIR working committee on ethics have produced empirical and/or theoretical works dealing with specific ethical issues and guidelines.

To review the Scandinavian approaches to ethics and internet research, see May Thorseth's 2002 collection: *Applied Ethics in Internet Research*, as well as further research by the contributors to this volume.

Finally, David Brin's *Transparent Society*, written for the mainstream press, provides a keen analysis and reconsideration of the concept of privacy, which can be useful in thinking about how we conceptualize this term traditionally, how our users might conceptualize this term, and how we might develop more productive notions in the future.

A Response to Malin Sveningsson

Elizabeth A. Buchanan

I entered the dialogue among scholars around Internet Research Ethics (IRE) rather circuitously. My doctoral work was multidisciplinary, housed in a school of education, with a specialization in information studies. My dissertation research examined engagement and discourse in online education, and how individuals experienced web-based communication and dialogue. The population I studied was in an online Bioethics program, studying such issues as informed consent, privacy, justice, and other foundational research ethics principles. Thus, the content with which my participants were engaging revolved around research ethics, while simultaneously, I was grappling with the *application* of these principles in an online environment. As a qualitative researcher, my methods included virtual ethnography, online interviewing, and log content analysis. While watching others debate research ethics in theory, I had to articulate my research into the institutional review board model of human subjects protections.¹ I did this first out of necessity—in 1998, no one on my university’s IRB knew quite what to do with my protocol that asked to use virtual observations, chat transcripts, click box consent forms, and email correspondence. But, more than necessity,

¹ In the United States, human subjects protections were codified in 1974: “In July of 1974, the passage of the National Research Act established the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research. The Commission met from 1974 to 1978. In keeping with its charge, the Commission issued reports and recommendations identifying the basic ethical principles that should underlie the conduct of biomedical and behavioral research involving human subjects and recommending guidelines to ensure that research is conducted in accordance with those principles. The Commission also recommended DHEW administrative action to require that the guidelines apply to research conducted or supported by DHEW. The Commission's report setting forth the basic ethical principles that should underlie the conduct of biomedical and behavioral research involving human subjects is titled *The Belmont Report*” (Institutional Review Board Guidebook, available http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/irb/irb_introduction.htm)

I was fascinated with the complexities of Internet Research Ethics and wanted to learn more.

In 1998, there was not much in the scholarly literature. I found disparate pieces, some from communication, some from nursing, the Frankel and Siang report in 1999. All seemed to be concerned about such issues as online privacy, ensuring consent, data security, but how researchers adhered to traditional human subjects protections while conducting research online was less clear. Internet research was emerging, that was certain. Cross-disciplinary, cross-cultural guidelines were a few years off. Meanwhile, I was invited to sit on the IRB at my university as an “online data expert.” Over the years, I watched and read as more researchers used various forms of the internet as both a research locale and as a research tool. Virtual worlds were studied, online survey generators became most desirable, perhaps out of convenience alone. Online research protocols, reviewed by IRBs, increased dramatically, and yet, we still had few standards or guidelines by which to judge these protocols. Most of the research ethics concerns revolved around informed consent and privacy.

In 2002, I proposed a book that would be a compilation of disciplinary, theoretical, and practical approaches to IRE. The response to the call for submissions was amazing: There was vast disciplinary and cultural difference represented, which illuminated the complexities IRE embodied. By this time, also, the AoIR Ethics Group had issued its guidelines, while two other fascinating compilations were published (Johns, Chen, and Hall, 2003; Thorseth, 2002). The IRE field was truly established—and, one of the core issues in IRE was delineated in the literature: Privacy.

Privacy and Methods

Privacy is defined, in the research realm, as “Control over the extent, timing, and circumstances of sharing oneself (physically, behaviorally, or intellectually) with others” (*IRB Guidebook*, np). One may argue that online, an individual has more control, as she chooses what to present, when, and how, in an online environment. Conversely, individuals may have less control online, given that disparate pieces of data exist on individuals and when taken together, in ways originally unintended, may comprise a false, or distorted, image of an individual—the data persona. Furthermore, researchers may harvest data from an online environment out of context, or without consent at all, thereby violating the control over the extent, timing, and circumstances of sharing oneself.

I would argue that online qualitative research in particular raises the level of responsibility that both researchers and researched share where privacy is concerned. Is it “easier” to violate one’s privacy online? Does it seem less harmful, as it is “just” an online persona? We would not think of walking into a classroom, for instance, without justification or consent, while online, we may walk into a newsgroup or online world without such consent, as our presence, our observation, and our research are less obvious. This calls for greater reflexivity in online research. Researchers must address their roles, must account for themselves, in the research process. And, with online research, we can be something we aren’t. Cases of deception and fake identities abound online—both researchers and researched can create false realities. What does privacy mean then?

Sveningsson’s discussion of privacy articulates the complexities of research in general and of internet research in particular. Clearly, a paradox exists around the concept

of privacy. On one hand, there is growing concern about the loss of privacy to government and to the corporate world, both of which want access to personal information for different reasons. In the US, for instance, great controversy has surrounded the Bush Administration's surveillance programs and the link with such telephony giants as AT&T, Verizon, and BellSouth. Conversely, social networking sites, such as MySpace and FaceBook, have grown exponentially and comprise places where individuals willingly present great amounts of personal information. There are distinct generational differences in expectations of privacy, as well as cultural differences. And, of course there is a major difference between having our information harvested without our knowledge, indeed our consent, to controlling what we present and how, and under what conditions and to whom.

James Moor (1997) calls these conditions a "control/restricted access theory." For Moor, the nature of computerized information leads to loss of individual control over our own information—it becomes "greased"—sliding easily and quickly from one place or person or entity to another. To maintain some control, we must establish zones of privacy, "zones [that] will contain private situations with different kinds and levels of access for different individuals...this conception encourages informed consent as much as possible and fosters the development of practical, fine grained, and sensitive policies for protecting privacy when it is not" (p. 32).

Brin's (1998) notions of the "transparent society" and "reciprocal transparency" offer another way of conceptualizing privacy that focuses less on protecting privacy and more on building accountability. In his vision, information would not be private, but this would apply to *everyone*. Open channels of information would flow even wider, thereby

equalizing privacy. "...if some company wishes to collect data on consumers across America, let it do so only on condition that the top one hundred officers in the firm most post exactly the same information about themselves and all their family members on an accessible Web site" (p. 81). Of course, Brin tempers reciprocal transparency, noting "There will surely be times when the only viable solution to some problem is to forbid the collection, distribution, and/or storing of certain kinds of knowledge, at least for a limited time" (p. 82-83). Researchers in particular must address such limited transparency, as online, information may exist for purposes much other than research *per se*.

Thus, for Sveningsson, the idea of Moor's zones is applicable in the research sphere. As she notes, informed consent as an aspect of privacy is a foundational principle, or requirement, of research ethics. Both informed consent and privacy must be considered as process, not static. Yet, traditional models of human subjects work tend to present them as static entities, and are often conceptualized in a binary framework; Sveningsson's presentation of the public-private demonstrates this inherent dualism extremely well. For instance, a researcher conceptualizes her research; she presents it to her Ethics Board or IRB. It is approved, after which the participants or subjects are informed about the research. They either consent or not. They either participate or not. There is little negotiation among the researchers, the Board, the participants. In theory, this is often a linear process that denies reflexivity, while in practice, research is messy, grey, processual—even more so online as boundaries of public and private are diluted.

Furthermore, a strong general criticism of IRBs or Ethics Committees has been that the perspectives are often too strongly bio-medical or behavioral, and do not

necessarily articulate, or allow for, different models or conceptions of privacy, informed consent, or ethic as method, as Markham has described (2006). IRBs are forced to walk a tight line, balancing numerous interests: those of the researcher, the researched, and the institutions themselves (universities, colleges, granting agencies, and so on) that foster and promote research endeavors. IRBS therefore mediate legal, philosophical, and social definitions and contradictions of such constructs as privacy, consent, and justice. IRBs must, by practicality, impose order to the oftentimes very messy realm of research. To make this manageable, research models have been, and continue to be, conceptualized in binary thinking. As Maximillan Forte (2004) has noted in a critical fashion, there are “scientific takers and native givers;” subjects and objects; agree to participate or do not agree to participate—the binaries go on and on. Rarely do we as the takers ask, as do Bakardjieva, Feenberg and Goldi (2004), “What do the subjects get out of it all?” Are we afraid the answer may just be “nothing at all”? If that is so, what does our research mean? Do our participants have to get something out of their participation in research? These significant questions warrant more pursuit.

Recently, I conducted a survey of 600 undergraduate students on research in general. I asked why they participated in research studies on campus, what did they learn, how did they think they were contributing to ‘a’ knowledge base. The responses, overall, were disconcerting: 70% of the respondents said they participated in faculty’s research projects either for the extra credit, or secondly, because they thought they were required to participate as part of their coursework. Another 16% simply didn’t know why they participated. When asked meta-reflexive questions meant to see how they read and

engaged with the informed consent document they received, it was clear very few actually read the document at all.

Discussions of these dilemmas occur in many fields of social research; perhaps internet research can contribute to different ways of thinking about privacy, informed consent, research in general.

Sveningsson's chapter continually calls into question the dialogic relationship between researcher and researched, within the framework of privacy and informed consent. She accurately shows the possible—and probable—misalignments that occur when researchers enter a space *only* for research purposes. The perspectives, objectives, and expectations are inherently different, which is not to say incompatible. As such constructs as privacy are redefined in the face of technology-mediated spaces, and as research participants conceive of their roles in online research differently, alternative models of protections will evolve. When we walk away from Malin Sveningsson's chapter, we should take away a greater understanding of our roles as researchers. What do we give back? We take great pains to “protect” and to ensure our participants have consented to research, but we rarely look back to see what we've accomplished for our participants and how; she shows us what privacy means and how important it is. And, she shows us the great responsibilities researchers really have. Online and off.

Recommended Reading:

For foundational research ethics, and for cross-disciplinary, foundational guidelines on ethical research in online environments, see the AoIR guidelines (2002) and the IRB Guidebook published by the Office for Human Research Protections (both available online).

Several edited collections specifically cover research ethics in internet research, including Buchanan (2004); Johns, Chen, & Hall (2004), and Thorseth (2002).

For philosophical perspectives on privacy and the information society, see work by Brin (1998); Moor (1997); and Spinello & Tavani (2004).

A Response to Malin Sveningsson

Susannah R. Stern

Determining how notions of privacy influence decision-making for qualitative internet researchers is a tricky business, not least of all because the concept of privacy itself is amorphous, evolving, and rooted in individual perceptions. How one defines privacy and/or private information, as Malin Sveningsson clearly articulates in her essay, has consequences for the types of procedures researchers will follow. In particular, she notes, researchers must determine if it is necessary to gain research participants' informed consent in order for a study to be executed ethically. Sveningsson's chapter is valuable because it comprehensively identifies the diverse factors that impact conceptions of privacy. Moreover, it wisely repositions the relationship between "public" and "private" as continuous rather than dichotomous.

As a researcher who has studied teenagers' internet use for the past decade, I have spent a great deal of time considering issues of privacy and how they bear on the research process. My experiences lead me to agree wholeheartedly with Sveningsson's conclusion that for researchers seeking to know how privacy issues should guide their decision-making about informed consent agreements, the best response is "it all depends." Nevertheless, there are some important considerations, beyond how one defines privacy, that provide useful guidelines as one endeavors to do qualitative internet research. These include keeping track of the big picture, allowing those we study to define their own privacy expectations, and considering how shifting notions of privacy affect the types of

messages and interactions that researchers themselves will encounter in their online inquiries.

Keeping track of the big picture

I agree with Sveningsson that the principle way in which privacy issues are implicated in qualitative internet research decision-making is via the informed consent process.

However, it is important to remember that respect for privacy is about much *more* than the informed consent process. While this seems an obvious point, it is, I believe, well worth making. In the daily effort of designing and implementing a research project, we often concern ourselves with the notion of privacy only insofar as it will “tell” us whether or not we need to go to the trouble of getting consent from those we wish to study.

However, when we focus only on the procedure (“do I need to get consent or not?”), we often neglect to reflect on the broader issue that the procedure itself was centrally designed to raise: namely, how to treat individuals as autonomous agents who should decide for themselves if they wish their personal information and interactions to be studied.

I noticed my own tendency to focus on procedure early in my career, when I was studying teen girls’ self expression practices on WWW personal home pages. As a graduate student in the U.S., I was keenly aware that in order to proceed with my study (and thus, earn my degree), the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at my university needed to sanction my research. Recognizing that the study of “private” data online would require me to seek informed consent (often a time consuming and expensive undertaking in online contexts), I worked diligently to build a case for why personal home pages

should be considered public documents. For the reasons Sveningsson articulates in the previous chapter, there was good reason to conceive of these publicly- accessible and publicly-directed home pages as public rather than private. The IRB agreed, signed off on my project, and helped me put the issue to rest so I could move forward with my project.

In retrospect, I began to lament my relative inattention to the very real reasons to be concerned with privacy issues. That is to say, I wish I had spent more time reflecting on how to show respect for the people I wanted to study, and less time coveting the stamp of ethical approval an IRB might bestow upon my project. I might have pondered a bit further such questions as: How did the young female authors I wanted to study regard their own disclosures? How comfortable would they be with the knowledge that a researcher was analyzing their intimate confessions? How might this knowledge harm them? What might be the consequences of seeking consent? For them? For scholarship?

Questions like these are worth asking because they are meaningful in and of themselves, regardless of their utility in directing decisions about informed consent. Of course, IRBs hope and intend that researchers do consider such questions as they draft their proposals. But the temptation to attend exclusively to the very real, everyday tasks of executing a project sometimes works against this type of contemplation. Fortunately, researchers need not dwell aimlessly in a period of solitary speculation about questions like these, since they can be informed by some relatively painless pilot work, as suggested below.

Allowing those we study to voice their own privacy expectations

Researchers who endeavor to study people online have a responsibility to investigate the privacy expectations of their research subjects/participants. One practical way to do this is by asking them, or people like them, directly. The participants' perspective need not replace researchers' good judgment or professional standards, but rather should inform their general understanding of the rights and duties involved in their research decision-making. Admittedly, it will often be impossible or unwise to directly interact with people whose online communication we wish to study. However, it is nearly always possible to find people *like* those we wish to study to give us some additional perspective. For example, if a researcher intends to study a particular online community devoted to cancer patients, her pilot work might focus on members of a different online community for people with another type of terminal illness. It will also, admittedly, be impossible to learn about every single person's individual perspective on the privacy of his or her own information and interactions. Yet this impossibility should not foreclose the opportunity to at least solicit a deeper and broader understanding of privacy expectations than a researcher might otherwise acquire.

After all, there is good reason to assume that those we study may adhere to an entirely different set of criteria in their conceptions of privacy than researchers. For instance, after I began to question my lack of reflection in the project described earlier, I devised a new project, aimed expressly at understanding how youth internet authors regarded the public/private nature of their online expression (Stern, 2004). My conversations with youth authors suggested that they considered their online communications to be private when they were kept hidden from the people they knew in their everyday lives, regardless of who else encountered them. This perspective helped

account for some of their seemingly contradictory behaviors, such as posting comments like “no one knows how upset I am” to a (potentially) global audience online.

Sveningsson usefully identifies factors, such as accessibility and sensitivity, that can help guide our decision-making about how to respect privacy in our online internet research pursuits. But my study suggested other criteria, such as reach and proximity, that might also be considered. Ultimately, this leads me to wonder... why should we, as researchers, get to decide what the parameters of consideration are? Given that people have such varying understandings of privacy, why should the researcher’s be privileged? In an age in which notions of privacy shift ceaselessly, it is important that our decisions about our research be guided increasingly by those we wish to study, as our own conceptions may be expanded or even challenged in this process.

Considering how researchers’ duties may expand or shift as do notions of privacy

One final issue that qualitative internet researchers might usefully consider is how varying notions of public and private translate to new experiences for researchers. Take, for example, the case of researchers’ encounters with distressing disclosure online. By “distressing,” I refer to disclosure indicating an online communicant is considering harming him/herself or another/others. Such disclosures are certainly not limited to the internet, nor are researchers exclusively likely to encounter them in an online situation. However, because the internet allows for anonymity, private authorship and public reach, many internet users feel encouraged to self-disclose what we historically might have considered to be “private” information, including distressing information. For example, a teen boy who harbors suicidal thoughts might not share them publicly in his offline life,

but he may feel comfortable elucidating them online. What is a researcher's responsibility when encountering this information? What is the most ethical way to respond? In another article (Stern, 2003), I identify why researchers might carefully consider these questions and provide suggestions for how they might handle such information should they encounter it.

I suspect there are many other types of new situations that researchers may find themselves in as notions of privacy shift in online and offline spaces. We would all wisely begin to pay attention to these experiences and contemplate what they mean, not only for research participants, but also for researchers.

Recommended Reading:

For some interesting reflections on the informed consent procedure and how it is complicated in online contexts, I recommend Reid's (1996) discussion of informed consent in the study of on-line communities and Frankel's and Siang's (1999) report on ethics and legal aspects of human subjects research.

To read more about the experiences and contemplations of researchers who concern themselves with various ethical issues involved in online research, consider reading the work by Binik, Mah, & Kiesler (1999); Christians (2000); Mann & Stewart (2000); King (1996); and Waskul and Douglass (1996).

