

Assignment 2.4

Assignment 2.4: Summarise Ethnographic Ethics

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Ethical Considerations in Online Ethnography

Ethnography “deals with the scientific description of specific human cultures” (<http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=ethnography>), whether that culture be online or offline. Ethnographic research completed via the Internet or, ‘online ethnography’, raises new questions of ethics and responsibilities for both researcher and participants. This paper will explore the new ethical considerations which researchers are required to appreciate when undertaking online ethnography, as opposed to traditional ethnography. It will be shown that although there are a number of ethical aspects which remain the same between the offline and online variants of ethnography, the new environment of the Internet also creates unique considerations, and adds new elements, which require careful thought in relation to the conduct of research in this environment.

As outlined in the National Health and Medical Research Council’s *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans* (‘The Statement’) (1999), research should always support the concepts of “integrity, respect for persons, beneficence and justice”. This is the case in both off and online research, and researchers engaging in online ethnography should be conscious of these being driving forces behind their work. The Statement also details the requirement for consent and the general requirements for privacy of information. Since these elements are common to both traditional ethnography and online ethnography, only their differences will be discussed, assuming that researchers are well versed in the requirements placed on them in traditional research circumstances.

As Allison Cavanagh pointedly asks in *Behaviour in Public? : Ethics in Online Ethnography* (1999); “[c]an we justifiably regard online interactions on bulletin boards, mailing lists and in chat rooms as ‘public status’ or do they constitute, as others may argue, a form of private conversation which is embedded within a public space?” This question is at the centre of the discussion over whether or not there is a requirement for informed consent on the behalf of the participants in online ethnography or, if like other public settings, researchers may use the information gathered more freely, being careful to protect identities. Even if used at this level however, “[q]uestions are also raised about how much a researcher should quote directly from online texts and whether her or she should give the name of researched community [sic]” (Frankel, M. & Siang, S. 1999).

This is due to the relatively permanent nature of discussions on the Internet (when compared with simple, offline conversation for example) and the ability of future users to search for, and locate, online conversations given a small, direct quote from the original. A decision will need to be made regarding the status of the environment that is being studied as to whether it is 'public' or 'private' and the level of consent gained from participants should reflect this decision. A diagram similar to this one may help in deciding on the 'publicness' of an online environment:

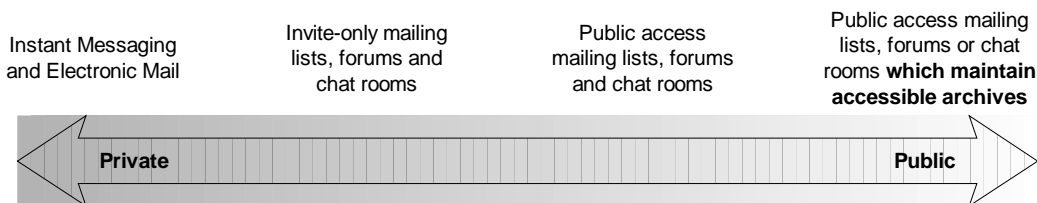


Figure 1: A sliding scale of privacy within online communications

If deemed to be 'public' in nature (such as an open mailing list with complete archives), then there is still the question of deception, which needs to be considered, to remain consistent with existing ethical guidelines. If the researcher chooses to observe an online culture without their knowing, and even becomes involved in the culture, then there is obviously a level of deception in play to keep their identity hidden. This type of research is largely frowned upon and should only be undertaken when

the research has considerable prospective scientific, educational, or applied value, that there are no alternative methods for achieving the expected results, that the risks to subjects are minimal, and that sufficient explanation or a debriefing will be given to participants as soon as possible following the conclusion of the research.

(Frankel, M. S. & Siang, S. 1999).

Assuming a successful, valid and ethical research programme is taking place, a researcher must also be aware of other factors relating to the security and validity of their data. Discussing online data collection, Wittel accurately states "[t]he accuracy of information about age, gender, nationality etc. can hardly be checked ... this uncertainty

is particularly problematic in a space that has become famous for its playful possibilities” (2000). The researcher needs to take particular care to either validate data supplied by participants, or indicate in the findings that no validation took place. They should specifically be aware of the tendency to fabricate information online in the name of ‘fun’. Once this data is collected however, new issues are raised regarding the security of said data.

Standard considerations for computer data security can apply here, covering aspects such as communication interception, requirements for encryption of data, backup procedures and security, password protections etc. If data is not protected, then the researcher may unwillingly (through security breach) release sensitive information to the public. Researchers will need to be aware of these considerations, even if participants are not.

Obviously, there are many related ethical considerations between online ethnography and traditional (offline) ethnography. This paper has only discussed some of the new elements which are (or should be) raised when the researcher probes into the online world of ethnography. As with all forms of research involving humans, the researcher should take careful consideration to ensure that their work strives to uphold the notions of “integrity, respect for persons, beneficence and justice” (NHMRC Statement, 1999).

References

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