2 Ethical Issues in Internet Research: International Good Practice and Irish Research Ethics Documents

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Abstract

This chapter discusses the main research ethical concerns that arise in internet research and reviews existing research ethical guidance in the Irish context in relation to its application to internet research. The chapter begins with a brief outline of high profile cases in the early history of the internet that highlighted specific emerging ethical concerns regarding the new medium and the first development of ethical guidance in this context. Important research ethical concerns in internet research are then presented. These include: (i) understanding the specific relationship between researchers, participants and the online materials, and the ethical significance of contributors' potential lack of awareness of research conducted on their online interactions, (ii) clarifying privacy expectations and ethical requirements regarding the access to and use of online materials, (iii) implementing ethically appropriate consent processes in the online medium, (iv) doing justice to confidentiality, anonymity and data protection requirements and (v) clarifying vulnerability of participants, and potential risks and benefits arising from research participation. In the final part of the chapter existing Irish research ethical guidance documents are reviewed in relation to the relevance of their guidance for the conduct of internet research.

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1. Introduction

Researchers conducting internet research frequently encounter challenges in relation to research ethics review. Internet research can pose new challenges in relation to the ethical conduct of research and research ethics committees are frequently unsure how to adapt standard research ethical requirements to the realm of internet research. As the other chapters in this volume have made clear, internet research is an extremely wide field that allows for a huge variety of approaches and research methodologies. Accordingly, an article on internet research ethics has to be selective and will leave out many issues that might be of interest to researchers using the internet as a medium or subject matter for research.

An additional caveat regarding this paper is the fact that, at the time of writing, only limited research ethical guidance is in place in Ireland, and none of the guidance that exists directly addresses ethical issues in internet research. Accordingly, the majority of the following discussion is based on international discussions of ethical research in internet research. In the final part of the chapter the existing Irish documentation will be examined in relation to its application to some prominent issues in internet research.

2. The development of internet research ethics

When use of the internet became more widespread in the 1990s, researchers' attention began to be drawn to the research potential of this medium. This included a wide range of research concerns, from an interest in understanding the use of the medium and the new possibilities of online activities and interaction that it created, to using it as a large and easily accessible repository of quantitative and qualitative data, and also to its potential as a novel medium for the recruitment of research participants and a medium for the fast and low cost delivery of surveys and other research instruments. At the same time, increasing attention was being paid to determining what

constituted good ethical practice in social science research. Internet research was one emerging area of research and the development of guidelines on ethical issues in internet research soon followed.

Among the earliest concerns highlighted in the field was the issue of potential harm that could arise in research on online interaction of internet-based communities. In the early days of the internet, the potential real life impact of virtual interactions was not always understood clearly. However, with increasing experience of the new modes of interaction, evidence accumulated that, despite their virtuality, online interactions had very real emotional effects on participants. Several much-discussed popular magazine articles that described the experience of harm resulting from internet interactions indicated that a reassessment of the presumed harmlessness of 'virtual' internet interaction was warranted. This in turn highlighted that internet research itself could not be assumed to be entirely risk free. In her 1985 *Ms. Magazine* article *The strange case of the electronic lover*, van Gelder (1985/1991) discussed a case of assumed online identity, where a male psychiatrist posed as a disabled and disfigured female "Joan" over a period of several years. In 1993 Dibbell wrote a much discussed magazine article on *A Rape in Cyberspace* in the *Village Voice*, describing the reverberations of an instance of 'virtual rape' in a virtual context, *LambdaMOO* (Dibbell, 1993). Both of these articles made clear that virtual events and interactions had the power of engendering very real and intense emotional experiences and similar observations have continued with the development of increasingly sophisticated modes of online interactions which, if anything, further intensify the experience of reality and immersion in those virtual contexts (Craft, 2007; Wolfendale, 2007).

Among the first attempts at providing guidance on internet research ethics were the 1996 special issue of *The Information Society* (King, 1996), the 1999 American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) workshop on *Ethical and Legal Aspects of Human Subjects Research on the Internet* (Frankel & Siang, 1999) and the 2002 guidelines by the Association of Internet Researchers on *Ethical decision-making and Internet research: recommendations from the AoIR ethics working committee* (Ess & AoIR, 2002). According to Frankel and

Siang (1999), relevant ethical issues in internet research included "[t]he ability of both researchers and their subjects to assume anonymous or pseudonymous identities online, the complexities of obtaining consent, the often exaggerated expectations, if not the illusion, of privacy in cyberspace, and the blurred distinction between public and private domains" (pp. 1-2). The AAAS document in particular proved influential in shaping what is considered good ethical practice in internet research.

3. Core ethical concerns in internet research

The following section will provide a brief introduction to the main research ethical concerns arising in common forms of internet research, with particular emphasis on its potential impact on human participants. It is important to acknowledge the significant methodological variety in internet research; the concerns discussed here are necessarily selective. The underlying assumption of this chapter is that the basic ethical concerns in internet research can be understood in terms of general research ethical concepts used in social science research (see also Elgesem, 2002). However, the various contexts of internet research raise some specific issues that require the reconsideration and problematisation of standard ethical practices; how much they stretch existing research ethical practices and requirements is open to debate (Frankel & Siang, 1999; Pittenger, 2003).

3.1. The relationship between researchers, participants and online materials

The internet allows researchers to reach large numbers of research participants who may be widely dispersed geographically, and to do so at a much lower cost than traditional research approaches (Frankel & Siang, 1999). This makes it a potentially very attractive medium for the recruitment of participants. However, much research conducted via the internet merely employs traditional research methodologies in the online medium (Pittenger, 2003). This mainly requires minor adaptations regarding recruitment and delivery to the characteristics of the online medium. As long as researchers clearly present themselves as researchers

and recruit participants transparently via non-intrusive channels, the ethical challenges arising in such research are mostly comparable to those encountered in traditional research mediums.

However, additional challenges arise when the relationship between researchers and participants is not established clearly from the outset, or when it uses channels that potential participants do not expect to be used for research. The internet makes it significantly easier for researchers not to have to present themselves as researchers in order to access interesting data . It facilitates easy access to vast amounts of materials that the authors may never have envisaged as permanently available, it allows researchers to view interaction without leaving publically visibles trace of their presence, and it makes possible easy data mining by researchers in contexts dedicated to purposes far from research.

As Eysenbach and Till (2001) highlight in relation to qualitative health research, the role of researchers could range from (i) 'passive analysis', where researchers analyse the textual materials on specific internet sites without actively intervening in the context which they are analysing, (ii) 'active analysis', where researchers intervene actively in a particular context to evoke relevant responses, but without identifying themselves as researchers, and (iii) 'forms of active recruitment', where researchers identify themselves as such and use the internet as a medium of recruiting participants and collecting information, which are clearly identified as research activities.

While deception in relation to the 'true role' of researchers is not unique to the online environment and is not uncommon for example in certain types of ethnographic research, it is generally considered ethically problematic in contemporary research ethics and requires stronger ethical justifications (Pittenger, 2003).

3.2.   The blurring of the distinction between public and private information

Usually, in traditional research ethics there is the assumption that a fairly clear

distinction exists in ethical requirements between public and private information. Use of material that is in the public domain does not require individual informed consent, whereas research that collects data outside the public domain is considered private and permission needs to be sought from the originators of the data for any use of that data. However, the internet is a peculiar case because the boundaries between the public and the private are frequently blurred in the minds of users, especially in relation to social interactions and personal communications in a wide range of online contexts.

What characterises all such sites is that on the one hand, material is not only openly accessible but also archived over extended periods of time; on the other hand, people write their contributions often under the assumption of relative privacy and react negatively to perceived intrusions (Frankel & Siang, 1999; Sixsmith & Murray, 2001). Even for a more recent service like *Twitter* which, in comparison to the original chat rooms, is set up more clearly as a medium of individual public 'broadcasting', in practice the very same issues arise, as evident in a lively discussion on the topic in Zimmer (2010b) where respondents expressed strongly diverging views on whether research on contributions on public *Twitter* accounts would require consent by account owners.

There has been much debate about how exactly to conceptualise privacy. Eysenbach and Till (2001) and Bruckman (2002) claim that the traditional dichotomies between public and private or published and unpublished become blurred in the case of the internet and become much more akin to a continuum than a dichotomy. Nissenbaum's (2004) conception of 'privacy as contextual integrity' is particularly promising in this context. She claims that within each context of interaction, participants have certain expectations about how participants in this context will behave in relation to the use and distribution of information. Contextual integrity demands "that information gathering and dissemination be appropriate to that context and obey the governing norms of distribution within it" (Nissenbaum, 2004, p. 101). Behaviour that breaches these context-specific expectations by broadcasting information further or to different audiences counts as breach of privacy.

In a similar vein, Bruckman (2002) proposes to consider most communications on the internet as 'semipublished' and 'semiprivate'. There is considerable evidence that, even though technically speaking contributions shared in internet chatrooms may be of a public nature, many participants consider them a strictly private space and can be extremely reluctant to allow researchers access to their interactions. A participant of an online support group quoted in King (1996) expressed her upset at finding out that their support group interactions were being analysed by researchers: "When I joined this, I thought it would be a support group, not a fishbowl for a bunch of guinea pigs. I certainly don't feel at this point that it is a safe environment [...] and I will not open myself up to be dissected by students or scientists" (p. 122).

Hudson and Bruckman (2004) conducted a controlled experiment where they compared chatroom activity in reaction to various forms of disclosure of researchers' presence and activity. They found that any type of explicit disclosure that researchers were present and intending to study the chatroom activities (whether merely announcing their intention, asking for opt-in or opt-out consent) led to significant hostility. Under the research announcement conditions, the researchers were kicked out four times more frequently than under the non-announcement condition.

Eysenbach and Till (2001) list a number of factors that determine whether an online space is perceived as a private space in which members are not likely to seek the kind of 'public visibility' that would qualify their contributions as public in nature: (i) some form of subscription or registration is required to gain access to the forum, (ii) the number of perceived users of the forum (see also Hudson & Bruckman, 2004), (iii) the implicit or explicit group norms, including statements who the target group is and what the purpose of the forum is.

With the explosion in the use of *Facebook* as a medium of social networking, privacy has become a widely considered issue. On the one hand it can be argued that the widespread use of social networking sites has increased the awareness and understanding of average users regarding the control and limitations of privacy. As Lange (2007) shows in relation to the use of social networking

functions on *YouTube*, users manage their social networks in relation to privacy concerns in a quite sophisticated and individualised manner.

On the other hand, as Zimmer (2010a) shows in his discussion of the ethical shortcomings of the Harvard-based T3 project, significant complexities exist regarding privacy on complex networking sites like *Facebook*. In fact, the T3 research project breached several privacy rules despite having undergone significant scrutiny. In particular, the layered and relational character of *Facebook* privacy settings made information accessible to researchers which was not generally publicly accessible, but was mistakenly perceived as if it was (Zimmer, 2010a).

3.3.   Concerns about informed consent

Informed consent is one of the cornerstones of research ethics. Most research with human participants requires researchers to obtain participants' explicit consent to participate in the research, on the basis of a comprehensive process of information about the research project. In order to be able to give meaningful informed consent, participants need to (i) have the ability to reflect on the information, (ii) make their decision voluntarily without being put under any pressure to participate or make decisions quickly, (iii) have been given all relevant information on the research and its potential implications, (iv) have understood that information, (v) made a conscious decision to participate and expressed it unambiguously to the researcher. For the use of traditional research methods in an online environment, e.g., the recruitment of participants in an online environment for online surveys, online interviewing or online focus groups, the standard ethical requirements regarding consent apply. Conducting informed consent in an online environment poses some specific challenges: in the absence of face-to-face interaction it is more difficult for the researcher to ascertain whether the participant is in principle able to consent and has indeed understood the information provided to them (Frankel & Siang, 1999). However, these problems are not unique to the online environment, and challenges to achieving meaningful consent are present in most research settings (Walther, 2002).

The waiving of consent requirements is a possibility under some circumstances, and there may be clear rules in place, depending on the jurisdiction in which the research is being conducted. Bruckman (2002) suggests that consent requirements for use of online material might be waived if this material (i) is officially, publicly, permanently archived, (ii) no password is required to archive access, (iii) no site policy prohibits it, and (iv) the topic is not highly sensitive (for similar positions see also Pittenger, 2003; Sixsmith & Murray, 2001; for a more simplified understanding of the problem see Rodham & Gavin, 2006).

As indicated above (Hudson & Bruckman, 2004), even requesting consent can lead to negative reactions in online settings. However, this is not inevitable. Scharf (1999) shows how she achieved explicit research consent by participants in a chatroom dedicated to breast cancer support, a very sensitive topic. She took particular care to gain credibility as genuinely interested participant as well as researcher in the chatroom from an early stage, and later used an individualised approach to specifically request explicit consent to quote from each individual participant whose contributions she wanted to include. This individualised, and 'private' approach by somebody who had already gained credibility appeared significantly more acceptable to participants than general public announcements requesting or announcing research access to the forum as a whole. However, as Eysenbach and Till (2001) report, credibility as established forum participant in itself might not always protect participant-researchers from negative reactions when asking for permission to research.

An additional concern is the role of gatekeepers of online fora for consent. In many research fields, gatekeepers play a significant role in determining access of researchers to particular populations. In relation to online research, Bruckman (2002) suggests that gatekeepers should be given a role for consent only in relation to those for a where the forum rules assign this role to the gatekeeper, or where the population studied is a particularly vulnerable population. However, many online communities are very fluid in terms of membership (Frankel & Siang, 1999; King, 1996; Sixsmith & Murray, 2001), so that the gatekeeper's relationship with community members might be less established and therefore less authoritative than comparable gatekeeper roles in real life.

3.4.   Confidentiality, anonymity and data management

Confidentiality as an ethical concern is generally a strict requirement for anybody handling other persons' personal data, and strict legal requirements are in place in most jurisdictions. Researchers are not entitled to use or share potentially identifiable personal data without the participant's agreement, and uses of personal data for particular purposes have to be authorised by the participant. The requirement of confidentiality is closely related to that of anonymity, but they are not identical. Confidentiality is concerned with the issue of accessing and sharing personal information only on the basis of authorisation by the person concerned, whereas anonymity is concerned with making sure the person whose data is being used is not identifiable to others from the research data. Confidentiality is also closely linked to the requirement of security of data storage.

One significant concern in relation to confidentiality is data security, beginning with the potentially unsecure transmission of electronic data, to lack of awareness of the kind of identifying information available to the researcher, to unintentional sharing of information e.g., through shared email accounts (Frankel & Siang, 1999), to finally the potential for compromising confidentiality at a later stage of research through data multiplication, loss or insufficiently secure storage, or even the problematic legal status of certain computer files as public records (Pittenger, 2003). As already indicated, the distinction between public vs. private data is blurred in the case of many types of internet communications. This has implications for the treatment of confidentiality and anonymity. Internet researchers cannot rely on an easy classification of data as public or private, but have to assess carefully the particular characteristics of their research area, and the specific attitudes that participants are likely to have to the use of their data.

One of the concerns in relation to confidentiality and anonymity is the use of pseudonyms in communications on the internet. While the real life identity of participants is in most cases hidden to researchers, this does not mean that using these pseudonyms, e.g., *Twitter* names, in reporting on research data is unproblematic (King, 1996; Sixsmith & Murray, 2001). As Bruckman (2002)

highlights, pseudonyms function like real names and therefore should be treated in a similar manner. Especially in the case of well-established online identities, users may care deeply about the reputation of their online identities, and may experience the reference to their original pseudonyms in research as intrusive as real-life identification. On the other hand, the personal investment in their online persona might also have the opposite effect: if participants take particular pride in their online presence or activities they may feel disenfranchised if they are not explicitly referred to by their pseudonym. Bruckman (2002) and Hudson and Bruckman (2004) point out that the strategy regarding anonymity should depend very much on the forum studied, and might range from scrupulous anonymisation of any potentially identifiable material to the opposite: taking care to identify explicitly the participant's contributions as theirs.

This issue can be considered in a slightly wider context, insofar as it points to uncertainties regarding the appropriate attitudes towards materials that are not created as research materials. Ess (2007) highlights the tension between viewing the originators of such materials as participants in human subject research who deserve protection, or rather as artists or authors who deserve credit and are entitled to copyright protections. In a similar vein Roberts, Smith, and Pollock (2004) explain their particular approach of managing the issue of anonymity or authorship through individual consent.

3.5.   Vulnerability, risk and benefit

Concern about participants' vulnerability is a particularly significant research ethical concern; prevention of harm to participants is generally considered to be the main rationale for the requirement of research ethics review. Internet research raises a number of concerns regarding vulnerability and harm, but also regarding potential benefit that other forms of research might not be able to achieve. Some of the concerns regarding risk of harm have already been addressed in the section on privacy and confidentiality. In addition, particular concerns regarding vulnerable participant groups arise. The internet is frequently used as a medium of support for persons who may be subject to mental or physical vulnerabilities, impairments or disabilities.

Accordingly, research on the internet has the potential to reach vulnerable populations, persons with disability or other populations that may not otherwise be sufficiently represented in research, and thereby achieve greater inclusiveness (Bowker & Tuffin, 2004; Frankel & Siang, 1999). This has the potential to lead to the creation of a more substantial knowledge base regarding those participant groups, which in turn could feed into the improvement of services. It may also have the added advantage of allowing those participants to represent themselves on different terms than may be possible in face-to-face contexts, especially in relation to overcoming stereotyping and stigma. From its early days, the internet has also served as a medium of research on sexuality (Binik, Mah, & Kiesler, 1999), risky health behaviour like recreational drug use (Barratt & Lenton, 2010) or other issues like gambling (Griffiths & Whitty, 2010) that people would be reluctant to address if they were not anonymous, but that might have significance for understanding human behaviour or targeting public health interventions.

However, tapping into the internet as a resource of knowledge on vulnerable groups also comes at a risk. Unwittingly becoming the subject of research may be experienced as a traumatic violation of personal integrity for members of vulnerable groups, as for example in the much criticised research by Finn and Lavitt (1994) on self-help groups for survivors of sexual abuse. In the case of most research with vulnerable participants, the researcher is considered to have a special duty of care to participants. In internet research, the identification and management of potential problems or participant distress becomes much more difficult if participants are anonymous internet users who may not disclose their vulnerability status (Frankel & Siang, 1999) or just break off interaction and be inaccessible to any further query or intervention.

A particular area of concern in relation to harm is the issue of researching the internet use of minors. Vulnerable children and teenagers may use internet facilities in problematic or risky ways, from posting inappropriate photos or comments on social networking sites, divulging drug use or under-age sexual activity, to cyber-bullying, or the use of pro-anorexia, self-harm or suicide websites. On the one hand, achieving a better understanding of these phenomena

through research is desirable; on the other hand, conducting research with minors on these issues could be considered ethically problematic. Difficulties regarding parental consent would be a significant obstacle to such research, not just because of general issues of anonymity, but especially because children may be very hesitant to even inform their parents about their internet presence and activities (Stern, 2004). Child protection concerns are an additional issue. Child protection guidelines might require researchers to intervene if they become aware of children who are at risk of significant harm, but to do so in online contexts is likely to be extremely challenging. Even the prospect that child protection interventions might be attempted is likely to make potential participants extremely hesitant to allow researchers access. Moreover, accessing such sensitive materials without transparent and explicit consent would pose the familiar problems of privacy.

4. Irish research ethics guidance documents and their application to internet research

First of all, Irish internet researchers need to be aware that their research might be subject to research ethics review requirements. In comparison to other jurisdictions, especially in the English speaking world, the Irish research ethics landscape is still comparatively lightly regulated. Outside of the EU Clinical Trials Directive (Irish Statute Book, 2004), there are currently no binding national regulations in place in relation to research ethics review. However, that does not mean that research ethics review is entirely optional. All health research involving patients or staff of the Irish Health Service Executive (HSE) is expected to be reviewed by a HSE Research Ethics Committee (REC). The Irish Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) now has the responsibility for the governance of health RECs, and is in the process of developing standards for those RECs. In the academic sector, most institutions in Ireland have RECs that review research conducted by their employees and students. Institutions differ in whether they regard research ethics review as compulsory for all research and in the level of scrutiny that different types of proposals need to undergo, but generally

speaking researchers are expected to undergo research ethics review for all research projects that involve human subjects.

What does this mean for internet research? As Walther (2002) outlined in his paper, many research methodologies on the internet do not meet the criteria of human subject research and are not likely to pose any risk to persons whose data is being considered in research. However, as much of the literature reviewed above indicates, it is important not to be cavalier about the level of risk that may be involved in internet research. Especially in disciplines that may have less experience with considering ethical concerns typical to social science research, like engineering, computer science or linguistics, the landscape of relevant ethical challenges to consider – outside clear health and safety concerns – may be largely unfamiliar to researchers. Accordingly, it is essential for internet researchers to clarify with their local research ethics committee whether the research they are conducting falls under its remit, even if at first sight it does not appear to them to pose obvious ethical problems.

Data protection is an important concern in internet research, due to the easy transfer and multiplication of electronic data. In the Irish context, the *Data Protection Act 1988 and the Data Protection (Amendment) Act 2003* are the main laws dealing with data protection (Data Protection Commissioner, n.d.). These do not specify specific concerns for research, but state general requirements for dealing with personal data. The detailed discussion of legal requirements is outside of the scope of the present chapter, but some general concerns with relevance to research data will be briefly outlined here. According to the Data Protection Acts, "personal data" is defined as "data relating to a living individual who is or can be identified either from the data or from the data in conjunction with other information that is in, or is likely to come into, the possession of the data controller" (Data Protection Commissioner, n.d., p. 2). As already indicated above, much of the data collected in internet research may not be personal data in the strict sense, and might therefore not be considered to fall under these requirements. However, as this definition clarifies, researchers need to be aware of the potential overall identifiability of data collected, even though it may have been originally collected as anonymous or pseudonymous data.

In relation to data security, the Data Protection Acts require researchers and other data controllers to have sufficient security measures in place to prevent any unauthorised access to potentially identifiable personal research data. The more sensitive the data, the more restrictive the requirements regarding access control. Internet research by its very nature deals with electronic data which is easily transferable and carries the risk of allowing unintended access to non-authorised persons.

Professional ethics codes are another frequently useful source of research ethical guidance. However, in relation to internet research, most of the existing professional ethics codes in the Irish context (for example An Bord Altranais, 2007; Medical Council Ireland, 2009) do not contain items with specific relevance to internet research; their statements on consent, confidentiality, and harm/risk minimisation are of a more general nature and are primarily focused on professional service delivery rather than research; those parts in the medical and nursing documents that address the conduct of research focus mostly on clinical trials research. Internet-based health research as discussed for example by Eysenbach and Till (2001) is not (yet) recognised as a research area worthy of special consideration in these documents. The recently published draft HSE *National Consent Policy, Part 3 – Research* (NCAG, 2012) is specifically targeted towards issues arising in relation to consent in health research and contains many helpful clarifications regarding a wide range of concerns relating to consent, but again does not cover concerns specific to internet research.

Psychology is probably the academic discipline most likely to engage in internet research involving interaction with human participants or the analysis of potentially sensitive data. Unlike the codes of other professional organisations, the Psychological Society of Ireland Code of Ethics (PSI, 2011) addresses a number of ethical issues with a degree of specificity that allows for the reflection on its implications for internet research. Section 1.2.7 of the code states, in line with the Irish data commissioner, that the researcher has the responsibility to ensure anonymisation or destruction of data as soon as identifiability is not required any more for the task for which data was collected, which has implications for electronic data management practices.

Other sections in the code address the issue of privacy which was outlined above as being particularly relevant for research on online communities. Section 1.3.17 seems to assume a clear distinction between public and private behaviour and explicitly exempts public behaviour from consent requirements in relation to taking audio, video and photographic records. However, Section 1.2.2 states to "[t]ake care not to infringe, in research or service activities, on the *personally or culturally defined private space* of individuals or groups unless clear and appropriate permission is granted to do so" (PSI, 2011, p. 6, emphasis added), thereby highlighting that what is private for a particular person or in a particular context may not always be clearly identifiable by an outsider and that the perception of what is private can differ between persons and cultures. Section 1.3.9 states that informed consent needs to be sought for all research activities which involve "obtrusive measures, invasion into the private lives of research participants, risks to the participant" (PSI, 2011, p. 7). While it remains unclear which level of intrusion triggers a demand for informed consent, the literature on research in online communities has highlighted that the threshold for perceiving research interventions as intrusive might be significantly lower than frequently assumed. Finally, section 3.3.14 might be understood as a note of caution in relation to using novel research approaches, as e.g., some approaches to internet research: "Seek an independent and adequate ethical review of the balance of risks and potential benefits of all research which involves procedures of unknown consequence, or where pain, discomfort, or harm are possible, before making a decision to proceed" (PSI, 2011, p. 12).

One of the specific areas of research where explicit ethical guidelines exist in Ireland is the area of research with children. The recently published *Guidance for developing ethical research projects involving children* by the Department for Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA, 2012) and also a comprehensive section in the HSE *Draft National Consent Policy* by the National Consent Advisory Group (NCAG, 2012) address some specific requirements of conducting research with children in the Irish context. Research with children also needs to conform to the requirements of the *Children First* guidelines which state relevant child protection requirements (DCYA, 2011). Two major concerns in relation to children's research are children's protection from risk and the appropriate

realisation of informed consent, which requires the involvement of all relevant stakeholders and the provision information in an appropriate format.

Due to the special protection of the family under the Irish constitution, the current consensus is that any social research with children under 18 strictly requires parental consent. As already indicated above, the accidental inclusion of children who are not identified as such is a real possibility in internet research that is conducted with participants whose real life identity is not ascertained during the research (Ess & AoIR, 2002; Frankel & Siang, 1999; Hudson & Bruckman, 2004). This poses a number of ethical concerns. Informed consent is one prominent concern in this context insofar as children might participate in online studies without parental consent. Guidelines for children's research stipulate that generally the threshold for acceptable risk in children's research is much lower than for research with adults. Accordingly, even if the subject matter itself might not be considered inappropriate, risk assessment for adults might come to different results if the intended participants are children rather than adults. In relation to risk, the *Children First* guidelines are also significant, insofar as children's researchers are required to be competent in assessing and adequately responding to child protection issues by alerting relevant agencies in the case of children at risk of significant harm or abuse (DCYA, 2011). They might require children's researchers, under some circumstances, to make such disclosure against the children's wishes, thereby breaching confidentiality. In research with participants whose real identities remain unclear, however, no such response to emerging child protection concerns will be possible. However, as the DCYA (2012) guidance document states, it is also essential that research addresses topics that are relevant to children's lives and actively engages children's viewpoints, including on potentially difficult or problematic issues. Research in relation to aspects of children's internet use might be very appropriate and valuable; however, relevant safeguards need to be put into place and researchers have to make sure that their research is in compliance with child protection requirements.

An additional area of research for which guidelines for ethical research have been put into place is the area of disability research. The National Disability

Authority (NDA) guidelines identify issues in disability research (NDA, 2009). The most pertinent in the context of online research are probably the issues of accessibility and inclusiveness of research. For some forms of disability, the internet as a research medium might be more accessible for research participants than traditional face to face or pen and paper research (Bowker & Tuffin, 2004). The internet as communication medium might allow participants to circumvent physical access problems, fatigue, or verbal communication difficulties. At the same time, internet research can only access persons with disabilities for whom written communication is a suitable mode of communication. One particularly important point in the NDA (2009) guidelines is the importance of inclusiveness and participation. Accordingly, it is essential that internet research on disability be conducted with a view to facilitating active and respectful involvement of participants with disability, and particular care will be required in planning an ethical approach to using materials created by persons with disabilities.

5. Conclusion

As this chapter has shown, there are numerous ethical concerns that need to be considered in conducting internet research, most prominently the question of the public or private nature of online materials, the moral status of online identities, requirements and suitable practices of informed consent, data management, concerns around harm, benefit and vulnerability and the inclusion of participants that require particular protections. This paper has also identified a number of Irish documents that can provide guidance on issues arising in internet research. However, these guidance documents do not explicitly address internet research as such. Accordingly, Irish researchers in this emerging field should refer to international documents that outline good practice, from the AAAS and AoIR guidelines to emerging national and professional guidelines and to ongoing specialist discussions of emerging issues, for example in the journals *Ethics and Information Technology* or *Journal of Information Ethics*, and analyse carefully the implications of the Irish guidance documents to ensure they are working within the boundaries of acceptable practice in Ireland. Because of the specific

characteristics and challenges of the internet as research medium, Irish internet researchers might take the publication of the present volume as an opportunity to create a forum of discussion of their research and its challenges. If it appears that certain challenges occur frequently in a particular area of research, they should bring these to the attention of their professional associations or other representative bodies, to ensure that these issues will be addressed in future statements of good practice and research ethics guidance documents. While this chapter could not do justice to the wide range of internet research methodologies and topics, each with their own set of ethical concerns, it has hopefully given readers an idea of common ethical concerns in internet research that will allow them to further reflect on the complexities of ethical issues encountered in their own research.

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