Research Guidance Note 10
Internet-mediated Research

The online world is a rapidly evolving one. 'Internet-mediated' or online research has increasingly moved from text-based analysis of newsgroups and chat rooms to the use of social media and virtual worlds for research purposes. Online survey tools such as survey monkey or NOVI have also led to an increase in the use of these tools to collect survey data over the internet.

The internet can be [31]:

- used as a tool for research
- the means of conducting and disseminating research
- the locale for research
- the medium for research

What are the ethical issues in internet-mediated research?

There can be particular challenges and issues arising from internet-mediated research (IMR). It is also recognised that the rapidly evolving nature of the internet requires researchers to continually reflect on the ethical implications for their projects.

Some of the key issues to consider when undertaking internet-mediated research are briefly described below.

Informed Consent can be more challenging to obtain in online settings

Informed consent is one of the key concepts in traditional research ethics. In an online environment gaining informed consent can prove more challenging as many environments have a transient quality. Determining whether participants are able to give valid consent can be more difficult; for example are the participants underage or do they have the mental capacity to give consent?

Where particularly sensitive or potentially harmful research is involved, offline consent procedures might be necessary for verification.

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31 Jones, C. (2011). Ethical issues in online research, British Educational Research Association on-line resource. [Available from https://www.bera.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Ethical-issues-in-online-research.pdf] [Last accessed December 2015]

Participation in the research

As there is no direct contact between the researcher and participants this restricts the ability of researchers to intervene or debrief participants if they disclose an intention to cause harm to themselves or others.

Confidentiality

There is much debate about how individuals view the internet; as either a public or private-space. What can be considered 'in the public domain' when considering collecting readily accessible online activities such as twitter streams, Facebook postings or other social media/networking sites is ambiguous. Researchers should therefore consider whether the individuals who created the original data/postings would consider them to be in the public domain.

Ethical approaches to publicly available information must include a consideration of the contextual nature of sharing and users' understandings of privacy. The AoIR ethics guidance applies this broad principle to public areas online

> "the greater the acknowledged publicity of the venue, the less obligation there may be to protect individual privacy, confidentiality, right to informed consent, etc."

Online information is very searchable, can persist, and can be transferred from one network or location to many others making it replicable as well. Published quotes for example can potentially be traced back to the participant via search engines. This can make it very difficult to promise anonymity for a research participant in these circumstances.

Extra care should be taken to consider and explain any additional data security and confidentiality risks due the nature of the online environment.

Where are the human subjects in the research data?

Understanding who, if anyone, is the human subject within a research project can be complicated within internet-mediated research. For example is an online avatar a person? Is one's digital information an extension of the self? Is a Twitter stream a document, treatable as text, or is it a discussion between people?

Collection of very large data sets (for example thousands of tweets) may appear far removed from the persons who engaged in these online activities, however we must consider if they could by impacted by the research. As evidence suggests that even 'anonymised datasets' can result in individuals being identified, we must consider if that connection between one's online data and their 'real world' identity could result in harm. This consideration links to the fundamental ethical principle of minimizing harm from any research project.

Reliability of data

The collection of internet-mediated research data may be skewed (for example due to the demographics of a particular online group) and researchers may be misled due to misrepresentation of participants (for example a child adopting an adult persona, or a man representing themselves online as female).

Researchers should therefore consider if the level of validity available in an online setting would interfere with the scientific value of the data collected in such a way.

What guidance is there?

There is a substantial body of academic literature, guidance and guidelines that have been produced by a number of organisations. In developing this briefing I have found the following to provide very relevant information:

- Association of Internet Researchers[32]
  - Gives a detailed set of Internet Specific Ethical Questions to prompt reflection

- British Psychology guidelines[33]
  - Provides a summary of the main ethical issues to consider for an IMR study

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[32] Association of Internet Researchers (2012) Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research, Recommendations from the AoIR Ethics Working Committee (Version 2.0). [Available from http://aoir.org/reports/ethics2.pdf] [Last accessed December 2015]

[33] British Psychology Society (2013). Ethics Guidelines for Internet-mediated Research (reviewed 2017). INF206/1.2013. Leicester: Author. [Available https://www.bps.org.uk/sites/bps.org.uk/files/Policy%20-%20Files/Ethics%20Guidelines%20for%20Internet-mediated%20Research%20%282017%29.pdfLast accessed September 2018]

- British Educational Research Association[34]

- NatCen Social Research using social Media; users views[35]
  - Provides insight into how social media users feel about their posts being used in research, and provides some suggestions for improving research practices

We would encourage researchers at Edinburgh Napier to apply the ethical principles from our Code of Practice on Research Integrity, to consider internet-mediated research on a case-by-case basis, and to engage with these available resources to help develop their awareness of the ethical issues from internet-mediated research.

We would also encourage our ethics committees to share and discuss experiences, and to develop best practice in dealing with the evolving ethical issues of internet-mediated research.

[34] Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research 2018 from British Educational Research Association. Available at https://www.bera.ac.uk/researchers-resources/publications/ethical-guidelines-for-educational-research-2018[last accessed September 2018]

[35] Beninger, Fry, Jago, Lepps, Nass and Silvester (2014) NatCen Social Research report, Research using Social Media; Users' Views. Available from http://www.natcen.ac.uk/media/282288/p0639-research-using-social-media-report-final-190214.pdf [Last accessed December 2015]