

NET WORK

ETHICS IN CYBERRESEARCH: TO CITE OR NOT TO CITE?

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The Internet is more than just a good place to exchange information, discuss your favorite television soap opera, or have virtual sex. It is also—as many researchers in the social sciences are discovering—a great place to collect data on human behavior. Some of the limitations that have most stubbornly plagued traditional social research are non-issues on the Internet: not only do subjects obligingly enter the data into the computer for you (i.e., their typed communications *are* the data), but they produce all manner of authentic social interaction in a way that is publicly accessible to any observer, without that observer's presence affecting the nature of the interaction. The invisible observer thus has unprecedented access to virtually limitless interactions which reveal how humans on-line form groups, construct identities, negotiate norms of interaction, make decisions, resolve conflicts, and mate. Because of this potential, "cyberresearch" has become one of the most productive and innovative areas of scholarship to emerge in recent years.

But is it ethical to observe people when they don't know you're there? Is it ethical to analyze their words and behavior without their permission, and publish your analyses in academic books and journals? According to some researchers,

the answer is no, never—not even if you protect the identities of your sources.

The problem is that some Internet users—out of inexperience, perhaps, or denial—post very sensitive personal information on-line. A case in point involves a Usenet support group in which participants attempt to come to terms with past or present sexual abuse. This group was observed by a social work researcher and the results were published in a national journal. Although the author anonymized individual names, he identified the group by its real name, justifying this on the grounds that "messages posted on [Usenet] are public information." For this he was roundly criticized by several Internet researchers, including Storm King, a graduate student at the Pacific School of Psychology, who argues in a recent special issue of *The Information Society* that academic exposure destroys the trust essential in computer-mediated support groups. King quotes an anonymous participant in one such group who feels reluctant to "open up" because (s)he is in a "fishbowl for a bunch of guinea pigs."

Do people retain rights to privacy even when they post messages in a public forum that anyone who has Internet access can read? King maintains that their "perceived privacy" should always

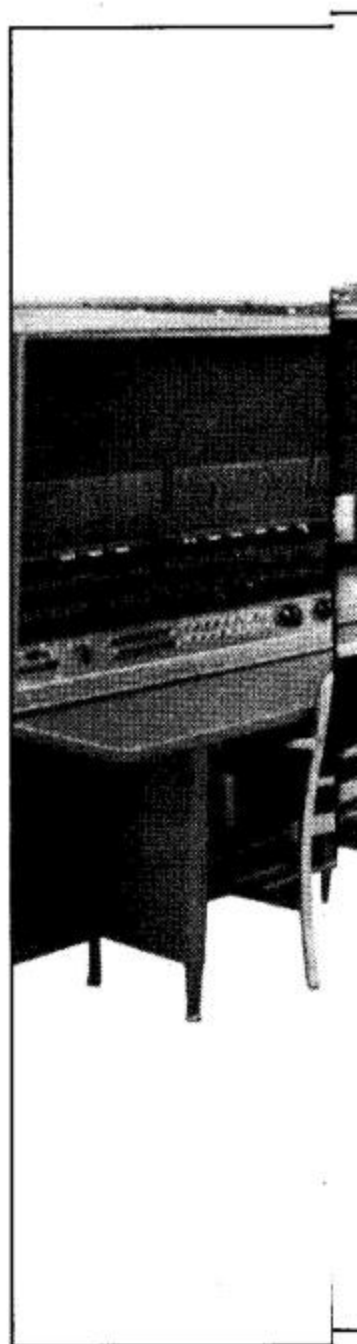
be respected. Towards that end, he proposes a set of guidelines for cyberresearchers that requires obtaining informed consent from subjects and prohibits mention not only of individual names but of the names of the groups in presentation of the results. There are problems with this proposal, however, on both academic and legal grounds. If data sources can't be positively identified, what is there to prevent researchers from fudging, or for that matter, making up, their data? Moreover, don't sources deserve credit for their words, i.e., if they contribute important ideas to the analysis?

This latter point especially concerns legal scholars such as Edward Cavazos. In a book he edited in 1994, Cavazos asserted that all messages posted on the Internet are copyrighted material. In order to protect the intellectual property rights of individuals in cyberspace, he proposes that any message whose content is quoted or otherwise referred to in scholarly publications should be fully cited as if it were a published written source, including the participant's name and the place, date, and time the message was posted. He contends that failure to cite cybersources fully should constitute an infringement of copyright law, and should be punishable by law.

Clearly, these two attempts to legislate the ethics of cyberresearch are incompatible: one requires that identifying information be hidden, while the other requires that the same information be made explicit. And while both are

founded on noble goals—the protection of individuals who disclose sensitive personal information on the one hand, and the protection of individual intellectual property rights on the other—both are oversimplistic approaches which do not accurately reflect the diversity of cyberspace or cyberresearch.

Consider, to begin with, the distinction between public and private interaction. King's proposal assumes that all participants in group interaction on the Internet perceive themselves to be speaking in a private or semi-private setting, whereas Cavazos's proposal assumes that all Internet messages posted to a group are intended as public communication which the author is comfortable subjecting to wider scrutiny. Both assumptions are clearly problematic in some cases—revelations of sexual abuse are presumably intended for a re-



stricted audience, while business advertisements "spammed" (multiply posted) across the Internet are intended to reach the widest audience possible. Should researchers have to decide on a case-by-case basis what the intentions or "perceptions" of individuals were in posting messages, and determine their citation policy accordingly?

A less obvious but equally serious problem is the assumption, inherent in both proposals, that there is ideally a consensus between researcher and researched. The injunction to credit every source assumes that the source is in agreement with the researcher as to how his or her message is interpreted and used. More insidiously, the requirement

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of informed consent constrains the researcher to produce research that is acceptable to the researched subjects, regardless of the nature of the study. But would an on-line group engaged in, say, plotting white supremacist activities agree to be studied by a social scientist? Requiring informed consent would undermine the ability of researchers to undertake critical research, including investigations of groups or individuals who are dominating or inflicting harm on others.

Finally, and bizarrely, consensus is also assumed to hold within groups on the Internet, despite the fact that the Internet is widely known to be a domain of frequent interpersonal conflict. This raises problems if "informed consent" must be obtained from every member of the group. What if some disagree? May the researcher study the group as a whole or not? What of the fact that membership in Internet groups is typically fluid? Must consent be requested and secured on every occasion that data are collected? Some would-be cyberethicists have proposed obtaining permission from the list owner or moderator at the outset of the research, on behalf of the group as a whole. Restricting "informed consent" to any individual or subset of individuals, however, privileges their view, and this view might not be representative of others in the group. The practice of asking only the list owner, who is already in a position of power, may itself reinforce existing patterns of dominance within the group.

Fortunately, there is a simple practical solution to the public/private problem. Henceforth, users can be educated about the public nature of messages they post on the Internet and made responsible for the information they reveal in this manner. And existing technology already allows listserve and Usenet groups to designate themselves as private by restricting participation to registered members only. Sex abuse survivors and others who discuss potentially sensitive topics would thus have a choice: to meet in private groups or to meet publicly and risk attention from outside the group. The guidelines for cyberresearchers would also be straightforward: treat all limited access interaction as private, and treat all unlimited access interaction as public. With private groups, researchers should obtain informed consent and avoid revealing the identity of the group. With public groups, such measures would not be necessary, although credit for ideas should be given wherever it is due. In the meantime, it's probably not a bad idea for researchers to cut Internet users some slack if they reveal personal information inappropriately.

Is consensus necessary? While it might prevent some abuse at the hands of unscrupulous or inexperienced researchers, an across-the-board requirement of informed consent would unacceptably restrict freedom of academic inquiry. The enormous economic and political potential of the Internet makes it susceptible to abuse by, e.g., commercial interests; one might argue that criti-

cal scholarship should be not merely permitted, but encouraged, as a means of exposing dangerous trends. Nor should groups in cyberspace be assumed to be homogeneous entities, lest we fail to understand the political nature of the conflicts and struggles that take place online as diverse groups with diverse agendas interact. Neither of the proposals that have been advanced to legislate the ethics of cyberresearch acknowledge this diversity or the potential for political conflict. Consequently, neither is an appropriate model to extend to the Internet as a whole.

This is not to say that cyberresearchers should be free to proceed however they wish, without regard for the rights of their subjects. The ethical issues raised by the proposals of King and Cavazos are very real; but let us not kill the research potential of the Internet by strangling it with rules that are too narrow for the medium.

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