

QUESTION THREE

How Do Various Notions of Privacy Influence Decisions in Qualitative Internet Research?

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During the last two decades, a new area of research has emerged—one that focuses on social and cultural aspects of 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 should be 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 from culture to culture. In some countries, citizens may be extremely concerned about keeping information about personal data for themselves. One country that fits into this category is the United States. There, the issue of privacy has been very much discussed, but discussion has

Responding essays by Elizabeth Buchanan (pp. 88–92) and Susannah Stern (pp. 94–98).

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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 their 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—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 information and activities 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 a great variation in perceptions among citizens.

The issue of privacy is central not only for ordinary people but also for researchers. In the research arena, privacy can be seen as safeguarding the 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 this chapter discusses. Taking as its point of departure existing ethical guidelines, this chapter looks at the principle of informed consent and under which conditions it needs to be sought. As is discussed later, research may sometimes be done without informed consent if the environment that is studied is public. The question posed in this article 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. Then follows a discussion of the concepts of public and private and what we really mean when we use those terms. Third, we 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., whether or not informed consent should be required). Most research that has been done to date has stopped at this point. 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, we should also take

content into account, both on- and offline, because if the material is of a sensitive nature, 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 can be studied without informed consent.

❖ ETHICAL GUIDELINES

Different countries have different policies guiding research ethics; the kinds of organizations that ensure compliance with guidelines also differ. Despite differences in organization, however, these guidelines generally concern the same matters. Regardless of country, obtaining 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; that is, 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 as this chapter claims, 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 to examine what kind of values 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 under what conditions they will take part (HSFR, 1990/1999). Other countries, such as Norway, have agreed on similar ethical guidelines (NESH, 1999).

Most of these ethical principles were worked out before the advent of the internet. However, the internet has not only changed 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

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conceptualized them transfer to these new environments, others require rethinking and revising. This is especially obvious in research ethics.

When studying online environments, it may often be difficult to obtain informed consent. As I found in previous research (Sveningsson, 2001, 2003), in many internet environments, far too many participants are 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—by filtering them out or harassing 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 look like. Further, if researchers take the time to write and send private messages to all new participants, most likely there will 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 by signing it with a pseudonym.

The Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) was founded at the end of the 1990s to be an international “resource and support network promoting critical and scholarly internet research independent from traditional disciplines and existing across academic borders” (<http://www.aoir.org>). In 2000, AoIR 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 earlier publications, such as Allen, 1996; Frankel & Siang, 1999; and 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 sometimes outdated and obsolete the next. But the rapid development is not the only reason for the uncertainty. 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 multi-faceted character of the internet, which makes it virtually impossible to create guidelines that will adequately cover all aspects of internet research. When asking ourselves whether 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 AoIR ethics working group had some animated discussions on this subject. Some of the researchers were extremely careful to propose and follow ethical guidelines similar to the current or traditional ones (see, for example, Bruckman, 1997). Others (see, for example, Danet, 2001b; 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, an experimental research design would do the job and yield the information sought; this strategy would solve all problems with getting informed consent and conducting research that is ethically sound. The problem is, however, that some other disciplines and research fields would not consider experimental situations to be satisfactory in providing the sought-for knowledge. This is the case, for example, for ethnologists, ethnographers, or anthropologists conducting naturalistic inquiry. In 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 did agree on 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, which is the focus of the rest of this chapter.

❖ 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 that fell outside of direct political control. Thus, writes 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, that 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 conception apply to online environments? What is to be considered open and what is to be considered hidden, when, 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 in answering this question is to ask additional questions that enable a deeper understanding of the contextual environment in which one is researching. Possible questions include the following: 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 or restrictions as to who and how many are allowed to become members? Is it not even possible to become a member, and 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 between public and private, but rather with a continuum in which 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 environments might therefore be as 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 participant 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, that anyone with an internet connection can access, and that does not require any form of membership or registration. Public online environments can 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 or 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 who 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

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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 clarify what kind of place we are dealing with, but it also makes ethical decisions and delimitations even more difficult. It illustrates a complication in implementing the recommendation of 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 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 in 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 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 these internet environments, which are often multi-faceted and where several different communication modes and arenas aimed at interaction coexist at the same site.

More than a decade ago, Allen (1996) noted that our conceptions of public and private can be blurred because both types of spaces can exist within the same internet arena. This is the case in web communities, in which users can choose among 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 constructed 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 multi-faceted 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 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 computer-mediated communication (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 an 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 forums, and it is easy to forget that the message may sometimes be stored and be retrievable for a long time afterward. 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 two crucial questions, which are discussed later in the chapter; namely, for whom is the content created, and to which audience is the content intended or directed?

The above examples demonstrate clearly that social researchers are forced to grapple with at least two different views of privacy: One view

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is based on how easy it is to access the site, and the other view is based on how public or private do users *understand* their contributions to be. Early ethical discussions of qualitative internet research mostly implicitly dealt with the first of these views: 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 problematic, however, and we thus see a shift toward acknowledging the importance of and further exploring the second view (e.g., Sveningsson et al., 2003).

❖ USING OFFLINE GUIDELINES FOR ONLINE RESEARCH

For researchers, one way to decide whether obtaining informed consent is required is to look at the characteristics of the parts of the environment we wish to study. In some cases, we may conclude that only some parts of a specific web site are public enough to study, whereas we have to exclude others. When we are struggling to decide whether informed consent is necessary, we can get guidance by comparing online environments with their offline equivalents and looking at what existing ethical guidelines have to say about studying those latter settings. In some occasions, these ethical 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 one is allowed to collect data without informed consent, under the 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, videotaping people's interactions on a street (NESH, 1999). The recommendations of the AoIR ethics working group coincide with those of existing guidelines. Again, it is important to note that ethical perspectives and guidelines vary widely by country.

The offline equivalent of the second type of environment above, the semi-public environment, might include libraries, schools, and hospitals. Here, it is more difficult to draw lines between what is acceptable and not acceptable to study, because different parts of the environments often have different characteristics. To do participant observations in a school cafeteria, for example, no informed consent is required. However, if one is to study classroom interaction, permission is required at least from the administrators 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. 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 is the object of the study 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 administrators, staff, or inmates. Instead the researchers gained entrance under false pretences and did participant observations that managed to capture the essence of the everyday life of these institutions. Had they informed the staff and patients about their research, it is not likely that the studies would have yielded the same results. In this and similar cases, the procedure can be defended by the object of disclosing bad conditions in society and emancipating people whose agency was otherwise restricted. Since then, however, research 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.

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, whereas 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 as something that resembles private areas and that therefore require more consideration from researchers and observers. One example of this kind of research was conducted by 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

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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 collection without informed consent can be acceptable in certain environments that can be considered public. However, as has already been noted, researchers of internet environments must make additional considerations for the perceptions of the people who are under study—that is, whether they feel the arena is public or private. We may also have to consider the nature of the content, which is discussed more thoroughly in the next section.

❖ CONSIDERING BOTH CONTENT AND CONTEXT

Having stated what kind of places may be public enough to study, the next step is to look at the content. We have to consider not only whether the places we wish to study are public or private but also if the content of the communication is public or private. This consideration 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 about answering this question is to take our point of departure from Thompson's (1994) 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, whereas "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, whereas private content concerns individuals' private lives as separated from societal matters. Using this definition may keep us from making unethical decisions, but it also excludes all studies of people's online interactions unless they concern societal matters, such as for example discussions on politics and economics at a strictly general level. It would become impossible to study people's everyday lives and everyday interactions as expressed online.

A second way of examining this issue is to conceptualize it along a continuum of degrees of public/private. At a first level, we have what is public in Thompson's sense: content that concerns societal matters.³ We then proceed across levels of increasingly private matters, moving from a macro to a micro level that concerns 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 of sensitive/not sensitive. One would assume that people in general would not speak about sensitive

matters of their lives in public, whereas they would share with the whole world those matters that they consider not sensitive (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 docudramas, in which ordinary people's private lives became the subject of TV entertainment, broadcast in prime-time national TV shows, developed into a formidable universe of confessions and exposures of private (in the sense of sensitive) 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, in press). In his book, *Liquid Modernity*, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2000) 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 inverse 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 by which 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 responsibility 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 counselors who can advise others. By watching or reading these examples, the audience can both get some guidance on how to deal (or sometimes not to deal) with their own life situations and get a sense of not being alone with their private problems after all.

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

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.

Therefore, 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 to be the case. 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 on their photos and diaries, and to sign their guest books. Not only do the users seem to be aware of the risk of having their material observed by others but also the attention from others is often what they seek. 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 caseworkers who have been doing fieldwork among young people at the web community in question (Englund, personal communication). According to these social caseworkers, 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 docu-soaps, where extremely intimate matters are displayed frequently and prominently. Yet, this discussion could also very well be turned the other way around: What is seen as public and not sensitive by the researcher may in some cases be seen as private and 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 question 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; that is, 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 she or 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 members of an audience about how *they* classify the content (and even there, different audience members may hold differing opinions).⁴

Another consideration 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- or 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 chat room, in which content was published by mistake (Sveningsson, 2001). In that study I made observations of statements intended to be “whispered” (i.e., sent as private messages to a chosen recipient) that were transmitted by mistake to the whole public chat room. This inadvertent transmission often amused the other users, and some friendly teasing and mocking were likely to follow, which undoubtedly were part of the local color 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 many mobile telephones. At the same time, this and similar practices seem to have increased people’s media literacy and general awareness of being observed. In general, informants say that 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 doing so).

We thus see how the concept of social control takes one step further as the technology advances. Maybe we, as Bauman says, are no longer afraid of Big Brother, but we instead have come to fear an infinite number of little brothers, who spy on us and make their findings known to 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 few years, we have seen an increasing number of signs in, for example, the dressing rooms of public swimming pools prohibiting the use of cameras, something that was not even thought of before the advent of mobile phones with built-in cameras. Practices surrounding mobile phones with built-in cameras have also had consequences for people engaging in affairs. In one example, a cheating young woman traveling abroad had no idea she was being observed and photographed

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by friends of her boyfriend, who then sent him the pictures they had taken with their mobile phones. 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 a simple mouse click, but even more easily, 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 may have become so accustomed to being exposed and seeing others exposing themselves 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 of privacy 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 of privacy, 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? Second, 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 issue, 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 recommendation is neatly included by the Swedish Research Council in their basic principle, "the claim for individual protection." This claim summarizes their ethical guidelines as follows: 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 suggested in the introduction of this chapter, to look beyond ethical guidelines to see what values we are seeking to protect. When we ensure 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 chapter is how to make sense of the variables, private and public, so we can better judge the appropriateness and ethical soundness of our studies. Our point of departure was the recommendations of the AoIR ethics working group. According to these guidelines, it can sometimes be acceptable 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 is 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 chapter 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 that places to be studied without informed consent must be either public or semi-public.

A second conclusion concerns the fact that internet environments are multi-faceted and are often made up of several different types of communication modes that permit different degrees of privacy. Here, one recommendation is to examine 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.

To determine the degree of publicness or privateness requires more difficult questions of classification and delimitation, which are 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 seeing more and more such content in public media, possibly resulting in an immunity toward it. 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 ten 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 more than ten years of

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research, 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 specific content is public or private, and what is seen as sensitive and not sensitive is a clearly individual question. This conclusion does not make it easier to make decisions, but 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.

Other questions relate to what we have discussed in this chapter. We could for example discuss whether the appropriateness of collecting and using online data differs depending on who the sender is and in what capacity she or he is communicating. Such questions may very well have implications for decisions we make in our research. A publicly known person may not be able to expect the same consideration of 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 question concerns various issues of identity: the role a sender adopts when communicating, the category or authority that is called on in the context in which she or he speaks, and 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 earlier, some material published online was never intended to be exposed in public, 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 transfer may sometimes change the way the material is interpreted; as Månsson and Söderlind (2003) acknowledge, 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 or make any definite recommendations. Research ethics, on- as well as offline, seems to remain a dynamic and unsteady field that defies all attempts at 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 HSFRR report (1999), respectively.

For multi-disciplinary and international discussions and methodological advice about ethics and privacy, the 2003 AoIR report, *Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research. Recommendations from the AoIR Ethics Working Committee*, is highly recommended as a starting point.

For more specific case studies and method-specific approaches and guidelines, I recommend Elizabeth Buchanan's edited collection (2004), *Virtual Research Ethics*, as well as her edited special issue of the *Journal of Information Ethics* (Vol. 15, no. 2), which outline 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 2003 collection, *Applied Ethics in Internet Research*, as well as further research by the contributors to this volume.

Finally, David Brin's *Transparent Society* (1998), 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.

❖ NOTES

1. The members of the ethical guidelines committee that worked out the ethical guidelines were as follows: 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; and John Weckert-Australia. The committee was chaired by Charles Ess-USA.

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

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

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 (2002) when classifying various genres of web pages.

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 (IRB) 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 e-mail correspondence. But, more than necessity, 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, and the Frankel and Siang report in 1999. All seemed to be concerned about such issues as online privacy, ensuring consent, and 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—but 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, and 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: Vast disciplinary and cultural differences were represented, which illuminated the complexities that IRE embodied. By this time, also, the AoIR Ethics Group had issued its guidelines, and two other fascinating compilations had been published (Johns, Chen, & Hall, 2004; Thorseth, 2003). 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*, n.d.). 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, whereas online, we may walk into a newsgroup

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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 the 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 United States, 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, and 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" (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 must 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 by 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” (pp. 82–83). Researchers in particular must address such limited transparency, as information may exist online for purposes 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 these concepts as static entities that 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, or the participants. In theory, this is often a linear process that denies reflexivity, whereas in practice, research is messy, gray, and 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 their perspectives are often too strongly biomedical 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 on the often very messy realm of research. To make this manageable, research models have been, and continue to be, conceptualized in binary thinking. As Maximilian 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

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on campus, what did they learn, and 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, second, 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 had 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, and 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, and Hall (2004); and Thorseth (2003).

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

❖ NOTE

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*" (*IRB Guidebook*, n.d.).

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, that researchers must determine if it is necessary to gain research participants' informed consent for a study to be executed ethically. Sveningsson's chapter is valuable because it comprehensively identifies the diverse factors that affect 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 principal 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 this 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 fail 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 personal home pages. As a graduate student in the United States, I was keenly aware that, to proceed with my study (and thus, earn my degree), the 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 this 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 on my project. I might have pondered a bit further such questions as the following: 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 perspective 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 into new experiences for researchers. Take, for example, the case of researchers’ encounters with distressing disclosure online. By “distressing,” I refer to disclosure indicating that an online communicant is considering harming him- or herself or 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 encounter 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.

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❖ 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 online 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, and Kiesler (1999); Christians (2000); King (1996); Mann and Stewart (2000); and Waskul and Douglass (1996).