The Methodological Issues Associated With Internet-Based Research

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Abstract

Qualitative researchers and social scientists are increasingly using the internet as a site for social research and observation. However, due to unique spatial arrangements online and new modes of social interaction, the internet brings with it a number of complex methodological issues. This paper draws on a case study titled Fan Fiction Online: Celebration or Appropriation? – a qualitative study conducted by the author in 2007 – and seeks to identify significant methodological issues which were encountered in the case study, and by other researchers attempting work of a similar nature. The methodological issues discussed in this paper are related to the following broad themes: the nature of the sample, modes of communication online, the blurring of public and private spaces, and confidentiality, consent and deception. This paper also finds that the discourse surrounding the relationship between online and offline realities may have significant implications for the role of Institutional Review Boards (IRB’s) and the consideration of renewed methodological guidelines online. It is suggested that renewed methodological guidelines be developed which address the unique research issues associated with the internet, while considering its relationship with the physical world.

Keywords: Internet methodologies – qualitative research – social research – Institutional Review Board (IRB)
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Introduction

The most recent growth in social research is marked by digital technologies such as those that spawned the internet (Christians & Chen, 2004: 19). The rapid expansion of internet uptake throughout the Western world creates the potential for new social experiences, and thus offers researchers new environments for social enquiry. However, like the internet itself, the emergent field of internet studies is by no means settled; its disciplinary roots are diverse, and its methods and methodologies are barely formed (Livingstone, 2005: 5). In this unique social environment, researchers are faced with new spatial arrangements and new modes of social interaction which cause complex methodological issues. The intangible nature of the internet means that direct application of traditional methodologies is often difficult, and unsuccessful. Teela Sanders (2005: 78) suggests that it is particularly difficult for qualitative researchers, whose methods must be sensitively adapted to unique modes of communication and social behaviours online. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the significant methodological issues encountered in a case study of online research, and by other researchers conducting work of a similar nature. The case study research, titled Fan Fiction Online: Celebration or Appropriation? was conducted by the author of this paper in 2007 and investigated the behaviours and attitudes of fan fiction writers in an online community. Participants were drawn from a fan website called TheForce.net and were interviewed online via a “personal messaging” system similar to e-mail. The study was informed by a qualitative design, and interviews were conducted in an effort to extract rich, qualitative data. The aim of this paper is to draw upon the case study to demonstrate some of the significant methodological issues associated with online research, and in effect, to encourage the design of renewed internet methodologies.

Many researchers have rushed to conduct research online, lured by its promising attributes and new opportunities to ease constraints previously associated with social research (Christians & Chen, 2004: 19). Some of the advantages associated with internet-based research include the ease with which researchers can recruit and communicate with potential participants, and the inexpensive and practical means through which they can manage complex research scenarios. However, scholars such as Christine Hine (2005), Michael Birnbaum (2004), and Mary Duffy (2002) argue that many of the complex social arrangements that allow newly found research opportunities online are resistant to traditional methods. For many researchers, the internet is unfamiliar terrain and its unique spatial arrangements may require new methods and methodologies which have not been fully developed. In 1999, Mark Frankel and Sanyin Siang cautioned that there are a number of complex methodological issues pertaining to the observation and reporting of behaviour online that researchers should be aware of (1999: 17-18). Since then, many academics have contributed to this discourse, covering methodological issues as diverse as netequitte, identity fragmentation, and e-democracy. Rather than retrace this territory, this paper will explore the significant methodological issues which were encountered in the case study, and by other researchers attempting work of a similar nature. These issues can be discussed under the following broad themes: the nature of the sample, modes of communication online, the blurring of public and private spaces, and confidentiality, consent and deception. Following this will be a brief discussion of debates surrounding the need for renewed internet methodologies including the role of Institutional Review Boards (IRB’s) in this discourse.
The Nature of the Sample

Although the internet offers researchers sampling advantages such as access to a range of populations (Best & Krueger, 2004: 2), participants in most internet based research may not accurately represent the desired demographic (Duffy, 2002: 84). While the heterogeneity of internet users is increasing (Buchanan & Smith, 1999: 126), it is still difficult for researchers to generalise from an internet sample to a wider population. Results of a recent survey indicate that internet users are mostly white, college educated, and aged between 18 and 29 years (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2007: [1]). These findings indicate that individuals in lower socio-economic demographics are not generally regular internet users. Researchers conducting internet-based research should consider that this may affect, or skew demographic representation. For example, in the case study, individuals who do not have access to the internet were automatically excluded from the research even though fan writing is not restricted to the online environment. Furthermore, in most cases participants online are self-selecting. Participants who are self-selecting typically make a concerted effort to seek out internet studies (Duffy, 2002: 84). Buchanan & Smith (1999: 126) describe these participants as “true volunteers” because they are rewarded through the satisfaction of their intellectual curiosity. These participants do not accurately represent a wider demographic offline, and thus researchers need to develop ways to increase sample diversity (Duffy, 2002: 84).

Duffy points out that one of the key factors which affect both the nature and the heterogeneity of internet users is access to appropriate computer equipment and internet technology (2002: 85). Differences in modem speed, for example, may change the time needed to download, receive, or view research material. Hardware variation may lead to discrepancies in functioning availability, and inconsistencies in software programs used may alter the appearance of content (Best & Krueger, 2004: 3). Some researchers caution that this can cause low response rates because potential participants do not have powerful enough computers, or appropriate software. A particular concern for researchers conducting global studies is that there is considerable variation in bandwidth from country to country. This has a dramatic impact on discrepancies in functioning ability and speed. It is imperative that social researchers concede that participants are working from different technological platforms, and acknowledge the methodological implications.

Birnbaum elaborates this point, arguing that it would be foolish also to assume that participants recruited from the internet represent a stable sample of internet users (2004: 365). The population of people who use the internet is continuously and rapidly changing; so too, is the population of people who have internet access. As Josh Walther (2002) explains, there is 'no way to use the internet to collect a random sample of the global population, much less the population of internet users’ (2002: 210). Even if researchers aim to recruit participants using probability sampling, in which case the entire target population can be identified and contacted (via e-mail directory or members log) (Best & Krueger, 2004: 17), participation in a social space online is reliant on the individual's interaction with internet technology, and therefore, potential participants can choose to disconnect from the online environment in a way that they cannot from the physical world. For example, to "go offline" does not imply the same as does to leave the physical world.

Birnbaum cautions that even using methods intended to target specific populations, researchers cannot control the nature of a sample recruited online (2004: 364). Other webpage moderators may place hyperlinks to a study that attract a population different to that targeted by the researcher. For example, a study designed to assess the effects of alcohol consumption in the general population might be linked to a self-help group for
alcoholics, or an upscale wine-tasting club (Birnbaum, 2004: 364). Despite what measures the researcher may employ, Birnbaum cautions that, ‘at the end of the day one must concede that the people recruited [online] are not a random sample of any particular population’ (2004: 365).

An example of sampling issues can be found in the case study project, in which participants were sourced from a fan website called *Theforce.net*. It was initially hoped that the website could be used to recruit a sample representative of all fan writers that were active on the site, and who would thus form the target demographic; however, given the decentralised nature of the website I was unable to access the entire target population from which I wished to recruit a sample. The absence of a central hub in the form of a common home page through which users accessed the rest of the site meant I was forced to recruit participants from a random forum thread page which group members visited sporadically, or when the forum topic interested them. The research was thus based on a case study sample of fan writers loosely based on a wider population demographic.

Participant samples that are recruited online are not only diverse in nature, but the ease with which participants can mislead others about one’s geographical location, gender, or age negates the researchers ability to effectively characterise his or her sample audience. Online, potential participants can deceive the researcher either by misrepresenting their identity or participating under the guise of more than one individual (so that a single physical person may be more than one virtual participant). Participants could, for example, participate in the same web-based research more than once (Duffy, 2002: 86). Sampling participants on the internet therefore raises questions about the validity and reliability of the data collected (Frankel & Siang, 1999: 3), often resting on the uncertainty of knowing who participants really are. Frankel and Siang state, ‘The ease of anonymity and pseudonymity of Internet communications also poses logistical difficulties for implementing the informed consent process ... For example, minors could respond to a study involving inappropriate materials for their age...’ (1999: 8).

Researchers argue that in traditional research settings it is easy to determine someone’s age and gender through their physical characteristics, and therefore cases of participant deception are far less likely (Walther, 2002: 211). However, while the opportunity for deception online may be great, there is little research to date demonstrating that internet users are likely to take advantage of such opportunities (Walther, 2002: 211). As Walther explains, ‘few have suggested any compelling reason why the Internet should cause individuals to ... deceive’ (2002: 211). Furthermore, there are other venues of research which offer every bit as much opportunity for deception such as mail surveys and telephone interviews (Walther, 2002: 212). The problem facing internet-based research is the unique nature of the internet environment which not only allows one to conceal one’s identity, but often encourages it due the ease with which this can be done.

**Modes of Communication**

As the use of the internet as a site for qualitative research increases (Duffy, 2002: 83), so too does the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) as a source of qualitative data (Lawson, 2004: 80). Qualitative research which involves computer-mediated interaction between the participant and the researcher introduces unique issues related to methodological design (Olivero & Lunt, 2004: 102). The conduct of qualitative interviews or the analysis of online discourse requires the researcher to take into account the unique modes of communication which are channelled through information technologies, or, as Nadia Olivero and Peter Lunt (2004) explain, ‘the dynamics of interpersonal communication and processes of meaning construction that are computer mediated’ (2004: 102).
A good example of issues concerning CMC can be found in the case study project. The central question which informed the research – do fans write fan fiction as a celebration of the original text, or do they write fan fiction as a means of disrupting traditional patterns of production and consumption – was designed to elicit ‘exploratory and highly descriptive knowledge’ (Hess-Biber & Leavy, 2006: 5). Prior to the commencement of the study I chose to gather my data via method of telephone interview as I felt that this would be the most effective means of capturing rich, qualitative data. However, ethical obligation required that the interviews be conducted online as participants expressed that they would feel uncomfortable being interviewed over the phone. My method of data collection thus became problematic in respect to the requirements of qualitative design. Given the limitations of CMC, I was forced to extrapolate more freely from the given data than I would have had there been a greater range of communicative cues to interpret. Non-verbal cues such as subtle nuances of tone, gesture, and body language contribute significantly to the richness and depth of communication. Online, one is unable to interpret these subtle cues which are available only via face to face (FTF) communication. This idea is referred to as the “Cues-Filtered-Out” theory which maintains that CMC is limited in its ‘socioemotional and relational possibilities’ when compared to FTF communication (Lawson, 2004: 82).

Chris Mann and Fiona Stewart (2000) offer an alternative theory, suggesting that technology has developed new ways of conveying meaning through CMC which may prove useful as a source of qualitative data (2000: 181). They claim that one of the key benefits of using CMC as a source of qualitative data is that both synchronous and asynchronous CMC have a conversational tone. They describe it as a “new kind of discourse” which combines characteristics of both oral and written language and exists as an important development in the long-standing debate regarding the use of oral communication versus written communication (Mann & Stewart, 2000: 182). While claims that FTF communication produces greater depth and intimacy are central for qualitative researchers, for methodological reasons, they should be aware that these debates are now moving away from the oral/written dichotomy, and towards the acceptance of a new kind of emergent discourse; the “electronic word” (Mann & Stewart, 2000: 183). The electronic word can be understood as drawing on unique methods of interpersonal interaction which differ, but are not subordinate to FTF interaction. For example, the persona of online communicants is often embedded in CMC via the use of nicknames and subtle allusions to personality traits. This is used as an alternative to the subtle sensory cues that people normally employ during FTF communication (Lawson, 2004: 82). The acceptance of the development of a unique internet discourse could ease the limitations associated with research which utilises CMC as a data source, such as the case study discussed in this paper.

Some of the most common forms of CMC include e-mail, “personal messaging” (PM), synchronous chat (often referred to as “Internet Relay Chat” (IRC), for example Windows Live Messenger or Facebook Chat), and in recent years, blogging (Glaser, 2004: [1]). Modes of CMC often vary depending on the software programs and technical characteristics which underpin certain websites. Often, this requires that the researcher base their methodological design upon the technical structure of the research environment. This issue is highlighted once again in the case study. As a method of data gathering it was initially proposed that the participants should be interviewed via IRC to allow participant and researcher to engage in synchronous conversation. However, to my dismay, the website did not support this capability. As a result, and in the absence of a clear alternative, interviews were conducted via a “personal messaging” system similar to e-mail. This meant that the interviewer was not afforded the flexibility available in a synchronous interview as participants were privy to the entire schedule before responding. While CMC offers unique and flexible means through
which researchers can communicate with participants online, methods can be compromised by the technical limitations associated with it.

**Blurring of Public and Private Spaces**

One of the central issues concerning privacy in internet-based research is the blurring of public and private experience. Online, flows of personal information are often channelled through a public forum which poses no restrictions on audience access. This poses complex methodological issues for qualitative researchers. Dag Elgesem (2002) explains that in traditional research settings there is a very simple trade off between the sensitivity of information and the accessibility of the channel through which it flows (2002: 201-202). However, this relationship is not so simple online. Elgesem states, ‘It is a characteristic feature of many forms of online communication ... that quite sensitive information is allowed to flow in these channels, despite their being accessible to a much wider audience than normally has access to private channels’ (2002: 202).

There are several examples which highlight this issue, including several which are drawn from the case study project examined in this paper. During the case study research, in order to communicate the research details to potential participants I had to become a member of the website fan group that they belonged. Even though the study was not based on ethnographic design, access to the raw data that was required was dependent on my becoming an official member of the group. This was problematic as I felt that I had somewhat intruded as a “poser” in a private environment, and thus feared I would lose the trust of potential participants before I had recruited them. My presence as a researcher/group member highlighted the fact that representations of public and private spaces on the internet are often misleading. While the website forum was essentially a public arena (anyone could access information posted there), one had to become a member of the fan group (and thus enter the private space of membership) to contribute to a thread. This scenario concerns both methodological and ethical issues at once. While the research environment dictated the method of engagement with participants, the method of engagement in turn affected my ethical responsibility; as both researcher and member of the fan group I had a responsibility not to deceive participants regarding my purpose as a member of the group.

Furthermore, while information posted on the forum threads were preserved in public data banks, group members undoubtedly considered that information exclusive. In an example of this, during the course of studies an American University student discovered great amounts of highly personal information published on public websites which she wished to use as a part of her project. When the student asked individuals why they published this kind of information on a public medium, she was promptly told to ‘mind her own business’ (Barnes, 2004: 209), highlighting the problematic nature of public and private spaces online.

Dennis Waskul (n.d) observes that online, individuals may act privately even in a public setting (n.d: [p2]). Susan Barnes (2004) extends this idea by suggesting that social messages exchanged online often create the illusion of privacy because correspondents cannot see other individuals reading those messages (2004: 206). Once individuals develop close internet relationships and comfortable patterns of communication online, they can easily forget that they are communicating in a public space (Barnes, 2006: 207). An example, again drawn from the case study, illustrates this. Originally – as was mentioned in a previous section – it was hoped that participant interviews would be conducted over the phone to allow the flexibility to probe for elaboration. However, of the twelve fan writers who responded to the initial call for participants, all of them expressed that they felt uncomfortable about this arrangement. This reaction was initially surprising as I considered telephone
communication to be no more revealing of identity or character than modes of communication online. However, even though flows of communication online could be more easily observed and recorded, participants who responded to the initial call for participation indicated that they felt more secure communicating via the internet, and thus none of them were willing to be interviewed by telephone.

In order to protect invasions of privacy, Waskul suggests that internet researchers need to formulate new conceptions of “public space” that narrows the boundaries of what we consider “public” (n.d: [p2]). Amy Bruckman (2002) offers a guideline, suggesting that anything that is accessible without a password may be considered a public archive (2002: [3]). While in the case study research the forum threads were accessible without a password, contribution to them was not. Elgesem argues that online, unlike the sharp distinctions of public and private spaces that are drawn in the physical world, sensitivity of information is protected by the ephemeral nature of communication and the shared assumptions of confidentiality in the community (2002: 203). It is worthwhile at this point to note that conceptions of privacy could be extended to address residency of multiple “self’s” in addition to residency of space; however, to give proper account of these issues would require a far more detailed examination than is possible here. Essentially, online communicants base distinctions of public and private spaces around perceptions of privacy. Elgesem suggests that violations of privacy occur online when the individuals reasonable expectations are disturbed (2002: 203).

Elizabeth Bassett and Kate O’Riordan (2000) discovered that perceptions of privacy online may be affected by web-users’ inability to effectively identify spatial frameworks. During 2000, Bassett and O’Riordan studied an online community/magazine constructed around gay and lesbian themes which they refer to as Gaygirls.com (a pseudonym). Gaygirls.com had a strong textual theme, following the traditional magazine format with a “front page”, articles, news, and images (Bassett & O’Riordan 2002: 240). However, community websites are often conceptualised through spatial metaphors such as individuals ‘going to, visiting, and being in or out of a forum’ (Bassett & O’Riordan 2002: 241). Bassett and O’Riordan soon discovered that these conceptions affected community member’s perceptions of privacy in a public space. They note:

The sensibility of anonymity that participant’s language conveyed was constructed on a spatial characterisation of the web site. Participants described their interaction in this forum as being removed from their immediate physical locality and constructed the forum as a “place” away from where they lived (Bassett & O’Riordan, 2002: 241)

There was an illusionary sense of privacy created because the participants constructed the website through spatial metaphors which facilitated the false belief that Gaygirls.com was a space over which they exercised some control (Bassett & O’Riordan 2002: 241). While the producers of Gaygirls.com understood the public nature of the website, community members regarded it as a ‘place away from where they lived’ (Bassett & O’Riordan 2002: 241), and as a private safe haven online.

These newly formed conceptions of privacy online indicate a need for renewed methodological frameworks which protect participant’s rights in this unique social setting. Waskul indicates that there is little merit in drawing explicit distinctions between public and private settings online, and argues that data gathering methods based on the public/private dichotomy will not suffice in internet-based research (n.d: [p2]).
Confidentiality, Consent and Deception: The Researcher’s Responsibility

Internet-based research raises significant issues regarding confidentiality, consent, and deception (Duffy, 2002: 86) and these are often tempered by privacy concerns. It is a key requirement of all social research to ensure the protection of participants—no less online than in traditional settings—however, communication via the internet is bound by certain spatial and technological parameters which make effective design related to privacy concerns problematic. Each of these key issues will be discussed in turn.

Confidentiality

One of the key methods used to address issues of confidentiality in internet-based research is the use of pseudonyms. Traditionally pseudonyms are used to protect participants’ true identities. In many social settings online, it is common practice for people not to perform under their offline names, but instead to adopt a signature username (Sveningsson, 2004: 52). Some internet researchers may argue that because it is common practice for internet users to protect their offline identities, confidentiality is automatically satisfied (Sveningsson, 2004: 52). However, online, researchers must take into account their obligation to protect multiple identities. Using online pseudonyms in research data will not suffice to ensure confidentiality as other users may recognise online names; even if other users do not know much about participants’ offline identities, they are not anonymous (Sveningsson, 2004: 52). For example, in the case study research, although participant’s online identities were protected via the use of pseudonyms, there was no guarantee that participants would not recognise one another in the final document through particular expressions or attitudinal traits.

However, in some research settings it may be problematic to conceal usernames. In most cases, users create their online aliases as a deliberate representation of the self, and that username can reveal important characteristics such as age, gender, status, and interests. These in turn affect the social interactions that user engages in; conversations may contain references to jokes, the subtle use of puns, and allusions to the user’s nickname. If the researcher were to quote a section of conversation without referencing the original usernames, much of its meaning could be lost (Sveningsson, 2004: 52-53).

In an example of this, Brenda Danet conducted a study in 2001 which resulted in a situation where concealing participant’s online pseudonyms would have been fatal to her results. She was studying instances of ASCII-art (where artists use letters and symbols on the keyboard to create pictures), and found it to be similar to graffiti in the sense that the artists nickname was often embedded in the picture. Concealing the participants’ usernames would have meant removing the electronic “tags”, thus directly vandalizing her research material (Danet, 2001: 7-9). In this case, it could be difficult to distinguish a piece of art from a contribution to a discussion.

Nathan Gaunt (cited in Whitty, 2004) suggests a solution which he claims remedies both the obligation to maintain confidentiality, and the challenge of containing social meaning. In his research on Internet friendship, Gaunt replaced participants screen names with a pseudonym, but also replaced them with a similar theme. For example a participant who used the screen name PSYCHOFEELLA was replaced with the pseudonym CRAZYGUY. In some cases, this method may help ensure confidentiality is met while retaining the significance of social nuances (Gaunt cited in Whitty, 2004: 215). However, researchers should be cautious not to underestimate the social and cultural significance of screen names.
PSYCHOFEELLA could, for example, work as a reference to the infamous Alfred Hitchcock film *Psycho* (1960).

Researchers should also be aware that the use of information technologies can, in itself, pose a threat to confidentiality. Communication which is typed rather than spoken leaves a physical trace referred to as a “data trace”, that can be archived or preserved (Duffy, 2002: 85). Data traces can result in breaches of confidentiality if unauthorized people have access to research data stored on a computer that is connected to the internet (Duffy, 2002: 85). If a researcher uses a home computer which more than one person has access to, or an office computer owned by an outside organisation there is risk that other household members or employees could access research material. The internet brings with it limitations which are effected not only by its spatial parameters, but also its technological parameters.

**Informed Consent**

There are issues concerning informed consent which are inherent in qualitative research, whether mediated or face-to-face (Sharf, 1999: 248). However, research indicates (Rutter & Smith, 2005; Jones, 2004; Mann & Stewart, 2000) that issues concerning the informed consent process online are often closely related to privacy concerns that are specific to the online environment. In traditional research settings, participants typically consent either by signing an informed consent document, completing and returning a consent form to the investigator, or giving verbal consent directly to the researcher (Duffy, 2002: 86). Online, researchers can obtain consent through relatively practical means such as e-mail, or documents embedded with statements that participants click to indicate their preference, such as “I agree to the terms of this study”.

Despite these available means, adhering to the requirement of informed consent can become somewhat complicated when conducting research online. Ordinarily, the requirement of informed consent is lifted in the instance when an individual can reasonably expect no observation to take place. Obviously when people are in a public setting they can expect to be observed. Conversely when they are in a private setting, they do not (Barnes, 2004: 217). However, online this distinction is not clear. Cybersex for example, the most private of all computer-mediated messages is broadcast on public media (Barnes, 2004: 206-207). This poses grave methodological dilemmas, especially in the absence of clear spatial guidelines with which to align ones research.

In an example of this dilemma, the nature of a simple school assignment in the United States caused significant, heated debate when students were asked to participate in an online, public discussion group and report their interactions as a part of their grading. Under the professor’s instructions, site members of the IPCT-L website (Interpersonal Computing and Technology) were not informed that they were being observed or that their behaviours were reported on. Site members had unknowingly interacted with student researchers and consequently criticised the professor for not getting prior permission from the discussion group to be involved in the assignment. Later debate about the topic revolved around whether or not the professor had needed to obtain human subjects approval due to the public nature of the space (Barnes, 2004: 217-218).

Certain kinds of social research that do not cause harm and include interviews or surveys of a non-sensitive nature may be exempt from concern, and in these cases, use of an “implied consent” procedure is acceptable (Walther, 2002: 212-213). This approach was taken during the case study project, because its focus was based upon a non-sensitive topic, and participants expressed that they felt uncomfortable about providing either their home address or telephone number for the purpose of securing consent. Nevertheless, the former case
illustrates that it can often be difficult to predict attitudes towards privacy when observing behaviour online. The use of a consent procedure is often necessary.

In another example, Elizabeth Reid conducted an ethnographic study of MUD’s (Multi-User Dungeons) during 1992 and 1993 in which she was faced with the task of obtaining consent to observe an entire community. In most discussion group environments there are far too many people to allow the researcher to inform them one by one that they might be observed, and it has been suggested that researchers might remedy this problem by seeking the permission of web site owners or monitors (Sveningsson, 2004: 49). Reid employed this approach, contacting the administrators of each MUD to explain the details of the study, and to ask their permission to observe the community. In her own words, ‘This decision involved an assumption that a MUD’s administrator was in a position to speak for the MUD community as a whole’ (Reid, 1996: 170-171).

Upon gathering the data for her thesis, Reid discovered that her assumption that a MUD administrator could effectively vouch consent for an entire community may have been ill founded. Reid discovered that having not given consent individually, participants who were observed underestimated the implications of consenting to be involved in an ethnographic study. She states, ‘... I began to doubt the wisdom of taking enthusiasm for my project to indicate both knowledge and acceptance of the risks that participation in it might entail’ (Reid, 1996: 172). The dis-inhibiting effect of CMC can often lead online communicants to reveal more personal details than they ordinarily would. The internet encourages a kind of "public exposure" which may eventually lead individuals to harm (Reid, 1996: 172). While the researcher should not necessarily always carry the onus of responsibility to ‘second-guess their participants reason for consent’ (Reid, 1996: 172), some consideration of the “cloaking” effect of online environments on the actual, or real consequences of self-revelation does not seem unreasonable.

Sharon Kleinman (2004) also encountered problems related to the consent procedure during her research of an online community OURNET (a pseudonym). Kleinman adopted a mixed methods approach utilising both participant observation and semi-structured interviews. In order to obtain consent from group members – both those who had participated in an interview and those who were observed – Kleinman posted a message on the OURNET site at the beginning of the project which indicated her presence as a researcher and asked that any volunteers who were interested in being interviewed should call her. Securing the consent of participants who were interviewed was relatively easy as they were able to consent verbally as they called to volunteer (Kleinman, 2004: 51). However, securing consent from participants who had been observed was much more problematic. Kleinman notes, ‘Gaining informed consent from all participants in an ongoing online group can be a challenge, because online groups often have a fluctuating population’ (2004: 54-55). Kleinman acknowledged that participants who joined the OURNET group after she had posted the message ‘might have had concerns had they known about the project’ (2004: 56). However, she decided to take that risk, given that announcing herself to each new member would have been both difficult, and disruptive to the research process (2004: 56)

**Deception**

Occurrences of deception in social research constitute a direct breach of the requirement of informed consent. In some cases, a certain level of deception is unavoidable, as illustrated in the examples given in the previous section, however, online, the opportunity to veil ones identity in a public forum creates the potential for researchers to act covertly even when there is no justification. This dilemma is further complicated by the vulnerable nature of online participants. Social messages exchanged online create the illusion of privacy as
correspondents cannot see other individuals reading those messages. Often these messages are therefore extremely private in nature as correspondents believe they are communicating with an individual or small group rather than a large audience (Barnes, 2004: 206). Coupled with the ease with which one may hide their true identity or their presence, there is opportunity online for researchers to become “lurkers”. A “lurker” is one who ‘watches what happens in the environment without being seen him/herself’ (Sveningsson, 2004: 49).

The ease with which one can “lurk” online offers the potential for researchers to truly distance themselves from their research subjects, especially for those involved in ethnographic studies for which the opportunity to become a “fly on the wall” is often too seductive to pass up (Sveningsson, 2004: 49). Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, comments posted online often leave a data trace which lingers long after the user has logged off, and researchers may be tempted to use this information as a part of their study. During the case study project, as it was necessary to become a member of the fan website which was used as the site of research in the case study project, I was forced to transcend the researcher/participant boundary by becoming a registered group member. This meant that I had access to potentially valuable and uncensored information regarding the participant’s beliefs and attitudes towards fan writing. However, deception of this nature on the researcher’s part could not be justified in the case study due to the lack of an appropriate consent procedure.

Protecting subjects from invasion of privacy is central to the ethical canon (Bertrand & Hughes, 2005: 16), and should be a methodological norm in all research settings. However, online there is also often perceived diminishment of the human element, which may incline some researchers to underestimate the significance of social interactions (Jones, 2004: 183). In response to this, a number of websites now include privacy disclaimers in an effort to govern online spaces and protect the privacy of users from within.

**Toward Renewed Methodological Guidelines**

One of the most influential lines of thought which has lead to the application of social research online is the dominant metaphor of the internet as a space (Bassett & O’Riordan, 2002: 234). The understanding of the internet as a space is useful in allowing humans to conceptualise the intangible nature of the internet (Bassett & O’Riordan, 2002: 234), however it also allows us to perceive the internet as separate from “real life” environments, and thus conflates the chasm between the real and the virtual. In its early days, the internet was conceptualised as something dramatically different from “real life” experiences (Sveningsson, 2004: 48), however renewed discourse has emerged which increasingly positions the internet as embedded within the broader social landscape. As Daniel Miller and Don Slater (2000) argue:

> we need to treat Internet media as continuous with and embedded in other social spaces, that they happen within mundane social structures and relations that they may transform but that they cannot escape into a self-enclosed cyberian apartness (Miller & Slater, 2000: 5)

There are certain aspects of the online world which make the application of traditional research methods problematic, however, as a space for communication and social interaction the internet is hinged to the cultural landscape from which it was born. The debate surrounding the congruency between online and offline spaces means that the role of IRB’s in determining the need for renewed ethical and methodological guidelines online becomes problematic.
Research indicates that the dichotomous separating of “online” and “offline” experiences can create methodological issues which are difficult for researchers to overcome. Shani Orgad (2005) points out that the integration of online and offline methods in social research are specifically linked with the conceptual concern of breaking down the theoretical barrier between online and offline realities (2005: 64). Many studies have revealed that in order to effectively study social and cultural relations as they occur online, researchers must acknowledge the historical social and cultural context within which all social interaction take place. In an example of this, the case study paper under consideration prefaced the research by acknowledging the rich history of fan fiction predating the internet, and the role of digital technologies in the evolution of fan practices. Lori Kendall (1999) cautions that social interactions online are inherently influenced by offline realities, and that in order for researchers to better understand participants’ range of identity performances online, access to offline environments is necessary for creating holistic character profiles (1999: 71). In her words, ‘nobody lives only in cyberspace’ (Kendall, 1999: 70).

Dan Miller and Don Slater famously highlighted this idea in 2000 during an ethnographic study of internet use among Trinidadian’s, titled, *The Internet: An Ethnographic Approach*, Miller and Slater discovered that the common assumption that the internet exists as an abstract space outside of “reality” is flawed. They discovered that Trinidadians had a “natural affinity” (Miller & Slater, 2000: 2) for the internet which suggests that the medium serves as an extension of the existing social and cultural practices that are embedded in their history; an idea that might be applicable to other cultural groups.

The role of IRB’s (referred to in Australia as Human Research Ethics Committees (HRECs)) under the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) in this conceptual web has become increasingly uncertain. Traditionally, IRB’s and other governing research organisations were mandated to protect the rights and welfare of human participants (Johns, Hall, & Crowell, 2004: 107). This includes formulating and approving ethical and methodological guidelines with which researchers should align their practice. The concern for internet research is that IRB regulations are firmly rooted in face-to-face settings and the literature culture of paper and print (Johns et. al., 2004: 119). Many IRB’s are not up to date with the complexities of internet research (Clark, 2004: 247) and it is all too easy for them to counter the irresponsible actions of a few with an ethical and methodological perfectionism that puts a chilling effect on the scope for research on virtual forums (Walther, 2002: 214). Some researchers argue that with the arrival of electronic media comes the need for renewed methodological guidelines which cater to the unique characteristic of the internet (Johns et. al., 2004: 119). Others however, such as Walther (2002), Miller and Slater (2000), and Kendall (1999) suggest that it can be dangerous and irresponsible from a research perspective to draw too sharp a distinction between online and offline realities. While there is not enough space to discuss this issue in its entirety here, it is recommended for future consideration.

**Conclusion**

As a research environment and site of social interest, the internet brings with it its own unique set of methodological issues. The birth of the internet saw a rush of social research online (Christians & Chen, 2004: 19); however, just as the internet presents new advantages in social research, it also presents new limitations. The application of traditional methodologies online is often both difficult and unsuccessful. As the case study and similar research highlights, due to the unique spatial structure of the internet and renewed modes of interaction, researchers are forced to abandon their methodological preconceptions and develop new techniques which address new issues. While it might seem reasonable to
assume that there is a need for discrete methodological guidelines to govern online research, there is an argument which suggests that the online world is inherently tied to offline realities (Walther, 2002; Miller & Slater, 2000; Kendall, 1999) which counters this assumption. Clearly, the research examined in this paper indicates there are issues borne from the use of the internet as a site for social research. Ideally, in order to relieve the problems associated with online research, there needs to be an effort made to develop methodological guidelines which take into account both the unique nature of the internet, and its relationship to the physical world.
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