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Introduction: A Debate about the Ethics of Fair Practices for Collecting Social Science Data in Cyberspace

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(19 Jan '96)

[4968w]

ABSTRACT

Most of us prefer "doing right" to the opposite. But, sometimes it is not easy to determine either what constitutes right conduct or how to do it. In this special ethics issue of TIS, scholars involved in cyberspace research explore the problem of "doing right" by research subjects. The participants here draw from their own research and the ethical dilemmas they confronted. The offerings illustrate how diverse ethical theories can lead to different views over which, or even whether, formal guidelines are needed for online research.

INTRODUCTION: A DEBATE ABOUT THE ETHICS OF FAIR PRACTICES FOR COLLECTING SOCIAL SCIENCE DATA IN CYBERSPACE

Most of us prefer "doing right" to the opposite. But, sometimes it is not easy to determine either what constitutes right conduct or how to do it. In this special ethics issue of TIS, scholars involved in cyberspace research explore the problem of "doing right" by research subjects.

In *FUTURE SHOCK*, Alvin Toffler observed that the future arrives too soon and in the wrong order. If the future "happened" in the right order, it would mean that our ability to understand and respond to changes would come prior to, rather than after, events occurred. If the future had the decency not to arrive too soon, we could better-prepare for it by predicting potential problems and proactively identifying possible solutions. One of the problems arising from the future-is-now expansion of computer technology is establishing the ethics by which scholars ought proceed when venturing into cyberspace.

Although some consider the term "cyberspace" a hackneyed phrase, it remains useful to denote something that happens with people using computers. By now, most of us realize that "cyberspace" is not a specific geographic or spatial location. "Cyberspace" connotes interaction with others by means of a personal computer and a modem. As we sit at the computer keyboard and magically etch our ASCII for others to see, we feel as if we leave it somewhere, and that "somewhere" is simply a conceptually metaphoric way of identifying the experience of electronic communication. Cyberspace includes a variety of forums and activities ranging from bulletin board systems (BBSes); electronic mail; public access systems where people meet, shop, argue, heal, fall in and out of love, or carouse; electronic discussion groups (such as Usenet or the Newsgroup hotlines); and real-time interaction, such as on-line "chat/talk" or IRC (Inter-relay chat), which allows simultaneous communication between scores of people. Where there are people, researchers are sure to follow.

It's no secret that social science researchers have found cyberspace to be a rich source of data. Whether labelled "computer-mediated communication," "cyberculture," or simply "digital life," scholars are examining the same topics online that have long been the staple of offline social inquiry. This expansion of cyberstudies brings with it questions of the ethics guiding how we gather data, treat subjects, and make public the results.

The participants here draw from their own research and the ethical dilemmas they confronted. Although the perspectives vary dramatically, there is convergence on several points. First, all participants agree that research in cyberspace provides no special dispensation to ignore ethical precepts. Researchers are as obligated to protect human subjects and "do right" in electronic venues as in more conventional ones. Second, each participant recognizes that cyberspace poses complex ethical issues that may lack exact

analogs in other types of inquiry. The ease of covert observation, the occasional blurry distinction between public and private venues, and the difficulty of obtaining the informed consent of subjects make cyber-research particularly vulnerable to ethical breaches by even the most scrupulous scholars. Third, all recognize that because a research procedure or activities may be permissible or not precluded by law or policy, it does not follow that they are necessarily ethical or allowable. Fourth, all agree that the individual researcher has the ultimate responsibility for assuring that inquiry is not only done honestly, but done with ethical integrity.

The commentators here differ on how to establish and define ethical behavior and on the basic premises on which such behavior rests. Are existing professional guidelines sufficient, or should we create new invariant guidelines specifically for cyber-research? Or, are ethics situational, dependant on relativistic norms or negotiated agreements? That researchers are ultimately responsible for the ethics of their research does not mean that they are solely or wholly responsible for the burden of protecting subjects from every conceivable harm. How, then, should "harm" be assessed and the responsibilities be distributed?

THE FOUNDATIONS OF RESEARCH ETHICS

It is useful to distinguish between ethics and morality. Ethics refer to the character or conscience of a person in relation to a group, and morality refers to the value system of a group in relation to the individual. Stanage (1995) summarizes ethics as person-in-culture, and morality as culture-in-person to remind us that the two may not always coincide. Because research proceeds from the obligations of an individual in relation to a group (professional associations, community of scholars, society), we limit the discussion to ethics.

The ethical perspectives espoused here reflect diverse and often competing views, ranging from rejection of the possibility or desirability of explicit guidelines to a call for formal codified rules. Ethical frameworks are often divided into two broad theories: Deontological and teleological (or "consequentialist"). There are others, such as postmodernist ethics or dialogic perspectives, but these less common.

DEONTOLOGICAL POSITIONS

Deontological positions are based on "rule following" and proceed from formally specified precepts that guide how we ought to behave. An example would be professional codes of ethics in the social sciences, which codify researchers' obligations and responsibilities to research subjects.

Deontological positions are often further subdivided into "act-deontological" and "rule-deontological." In the former, basic judgments of value are particularistic or situational, drawing on shared principles of, for example, "justice" to establish the proper course of

action in a given situation. In the latter, behavior is guided by concrete, universal rules, such as "thou shalt not lie."

An example will help illustrate the difference between the two positions. Consider the case of two prison researchers, both of whom promised their subjects complete confidentiality in exchange for candid information. In each case, the information is "dirty" (Thomas and Marquart, 1988) in that revelation could put the subjects at legal or other risk. Both researchers elicited from prison staff detailed information describing mistreatment of prisoners. In both cases, the researchers were subpoenaed to testify against their research subjects in civil suits against prison staff. One researcher broke his vow of confidentiality and testified, with unpleasant consequences for subjects. The other did not. Both appealed to the "rules" of an ethical theory to justify their actions. The researcher who testified adhered to an act-deontological position in which the particular circumstances, abuse of authority and corresponding subversion of justice by those sworn to uphold it, compelled him in this situation to break his promise in order to fulfill a higher principle. The researcher who remained silent adhered to a rule-deontological position: He made a promise that he was duty-bound to keep, regardless of the consequences. Both decisions proceeded from strong ethical principles, and neither researcher could be faulted for his respective decision.

TELEOLOGICAL (CONSEQUENTIALIST) PERSPECTIVES

A "teleological" perspective, associated with, but not exclusive to, Utilitarianism," operates from the premise that ethical behavior is determined by the consequences of an act. Some erroneously construe this to mean that "the end justifies the means," but this is misleading. Teleological perspectives hold that the goal or end of an act should be weighed with a calculus that, on balance, will result in the greatest social good or the least social harm. Utilitarianism, the most common form of teleological theories, is also divided into two variants: Act-utilitarianism and rule-utilitarianism. Act-utilitarianism holds that correct actions are contingent upon the particular nature of the situation, and the guiding principle is the degree to which the specific act will maximize the greatest balance of "good." Rule-utilitarianism, associated with John Stuart Mill, emphasizes the primacy of general rules of conduct, but these rules are derived from the principle of the greatest universal utility, which is:

...that pleasure and freedom from pain are the only things desirable as ends; and that all desirable things (which are as numerous in the utilitarian as in any other scheme) are desirable either for pleasure inherent in themselves or as means to the promotion of pleasure and the prevention of pain (Mill, 1957: 10-11).

"Happiness" in this perspective is neither a hedonistic nor an indolently selfish concept, but based instead on the cultivation of the "public good" and the utility of the act as a means toward that end. Unlike teleologists, Utilitarians argue that theirs avoids becoming entrapped

in normative or contradictory rules and potentially relativistic duty-imposing obligations.

Consider again the researcher who broke his vow of confidentiality to testify against his informants. If, instead of appealing to a transcendent rule, he had argued that his testimony was necessary to end abuse of prisoners by staff and thereby promote justice as a social good, he could make his case from an act-utilitarian position. By contrast, a rule-utilitarian approach is not uncommon amongst journalists who argue that invasions of personal privacy are outweighed by the public's "right to know," or amongst researchers who intentionally lie to gain access to "deviant" research settings on the grounds that it is the only way to obtain information on an intellectually important topic.

Mapping out the broad brushstrokes of competing ethical perspectives serves several purposes. First, it provides a backdrop against which we can more easily highlight the principles by which ethical problems are identified and solutions to them sought. Second, it helps us to understand the fundamental premises of our own and others' ethical perspectives. This can be useful when attempting to clarify the differences in various positions, and to remind us that research ethics are complex. Finally, locating our own ethical positions within existing theories helps clarify our own thinking by teasing out the sources of the principles to which we adhere, why we adhere to them, and the implications of our choices on both our scholarship and our

CONVENTIONAL ETHICAL GUIDELINES

The guidelines that inform the policies and standards of most universities and professional associations derive from two documents, The Belmont Report (1979) and the Federal Register (1991). The former, reflecting a teleological perspective, offers basic principles. The latter, most closely derived from a rule-deontological position, specifies rules and obligations. Both The Belmont Report and the Federal Register (1991) provide a boiler plate model followed by state and many other institutions in establishing principles and policies for all researchers, whether funded or non-funded, who conduct research under the university's name. The wording of my own university's Graduate School Office of Research Compliance guidelines is fairly standard:

I. ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

A. This institution is guided by the ethical principles regarding all research involving humans as subjects, as set forth in the report of the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (entitled: Ethical Principles and Guidelines for the Protection of Human Subjects of Research ((the "Belmont Report"))),

REGARDLESS OF WHETHER THE RESEARCH IS SUBJECT TO

FEDERAL REGULATION, OR WITH WHOM CONDUCTED, OR SOURCE OF SUPPORT (I.E., SPONSORSHIP). (emphasis added--jt)

Unlike Federal or institutional rules, the Belmont Report (BR) specifies three broad principles (rather than explicit rules) to guide research.

1) RESPECT FOR PERSONS:

Respect for persons incorporates at least two ethical convictions: first, that individuals should be treated as autonomous agents, and second, that persons with diminished autonomy are entitled to protection (BR: 4). Although intended primarily to protect from abuse those persons not fully capable of making an informed decision to participate in research (eg, the mentally disabled or institutionalized persons), respect for persons extends to others, and includes providing adequate information about the research:

In most cases of research involving human subjects, respect for persons demands that subjects enter into the research voluntarily and with adequate information (BR: 4).

2) BENEFICENCE: This principle extends the Hippocratic maxim of "do no harm" to the ethical obligations of a researcher:

Persons are treated in an ethical manner not only by respecting their decisions and by protecting them from harm, but also by making efforts to secure their well-being. Such treatment falls under the principle of beneficence. The term "beneficence" is often understood to cover acts of kindness or charity that go beyond strict obligation. In this document, beneficence is understood in a strong sense, as an obligation. Two general rules have been formulated as complementary expressions of beneficent actions in this sense: (1) do not harm and (2) maximize possible benefits and minimize possible harms (BR: 4).

The principle of beneficence assumes that scholars will carefully think through the implications of their research, especially in sensitive topics where the subjects could be placed in physical, social, or legal jeopardy.

3) JUSTICE: The principle of justice centers on "who ought to receive the benefits of research and bear its burdens" (BR: 5). The Belmont Report conceptualizes the principle of justice as placing an obligation on the researcher to assess the distribution of "fairness" toward the research subjects and social interests.

HOW SHOULD THESE PRINCIPLES BE APPLIED?

The Belmont Report identifies several ways by which the principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice can be implemented. One way is INFORMED CONSENT:

While the importance of informed consent is unquestioned, controversy prevails over the nature and possibility of an informed consent. Nonetheless, there is widespread agreement that the consent process can be analyzed as containing three elements: information, comprehension, and voluntariness (BR: 5).

INFORMATION:

Most codes of research establish specific items for disclosure intended to assure that subjects are given sufficient information. These items generally include: the research procedure, their purposes, risks and anticipated benefits, alternative procedures (where therapy is involved), and a statement offering the subject the opportunity to ask questions and to withdraw at any time from the research (BR: 5).

COMPREHENSION

Another way to implement the Belmont Report principles is by assuring that research subjects comprehend the information and understand what they are consenting to:

The manner and context in which information is conveyed is as important as the information itself. For example, presenting information in a disorganized and rapid fashion, allowing too little time for consideration or curtailing opportunities for questioning, all may adversely affect a subject's ability to make an informed choice (BR: 6).

VOLUNTARINESS

Finally, the Belmont Report principles can be implemented only if the subjects give consent voluntarily:

This element of informed consent requires conditions free of coercion and undue influence. Coercion occurs when an overt threat of harm is intentionally presented by one person to another in order to obtain compliance. Undue influence, by contrast, occurs through an offer of an excessive, unwarranted, inappropriate or improper reward or other overture in order to obtain compliance (BR: 6).

The spirit and letter of the Belmont report is explicitly and unequivocally clear:

1. Researchers are ethically bound to protect their subjects from potential risks or unnecessary harm.
2. Researchers are ethically bound to obtain consent from their research subjects
3. Researchers are ethically obligated to inform their subjects of the nature of the study and potential risks
4. Deception or other trickery employed to manipulate subjects into participating in research is a fundamental violation of the Belmont Report principles.

WHAT IS HUMAN SUBJECTS RESEARCH?

Professional societies such as the APA (American Psychological Association) and ASA (American Sociological Association) provide ethical guidelines shaped by Federal, institutional, and other sources. Federal guidelines (FR, 1991) specify a number of reasonable explicit rules. Violations of these rules place a research project or an institution in non-compliance with Federally and other mandated ethical standards.

The term "research" refers to "a systematic investigation, including research development, testing and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge" (FR 102(d)).

(f) Human Subject means a living individual about whom an investigator (whether professional or student) conducting research obtains (1) data through intervention or interaction with the individual, or (2) identifiable private information....**INTERACTION** includes communication or interpersonal contact between investigator and subject. "Private information" includes information about behavior that occurs in a context in which an individual can reasonably expect that no observation or recording is taking place, and information which has been provided for specific purposes by an individual and which the individual can reasonably expect will not be made public (for example, a medical record). Private information must be individually identifiable (i.e., the identity of the subject is or may readily be ascertained by the investigator or associated with the information) in order for obtaining the information to constitute research involving human subjects (FR, 102(f)(2)).

Institutions that receive federal research funds, including private ones, are required to implement procedures to assure compliance with Federal guidelines:

(a) Each institution engaged in research which is covered by this policy and which is conducted or supported by a federal department or agency shall provide written assurance satisfactory to the department or agency head that it will comply with the requirements set forth in this policy (FR: 103(a)).

There are some exceptions to the review requirement for human subjects, such as when conducting general educational tests or surveys, engaging in policy evaluation, or gathering data that is either public.

Federal guidelines also specifically and unequivocally require informed consent (FR: 116):

Except as provided elsewhere in this policy, no investigator may involve a human being as a subject in research covered by this policy unless the investigator has obtained the legally effective informed consent of the subject or the subject's legally authorized representative.

The exceptions include the type of research exempted from human subjects review. The elements of informed consent include 1) identification of the research project, and the purposes, duration, and procedures to be followed; 2) A description of foreseeable risks or discomforts; 3) A description of benefits to the subject; 4) A description of the extent to which confidentiality of records identifying the subject will be maintained.

From this summary, two points are clear. First, it is indisputable that cyberspace research entails "human subjects." Second, it is clear that existing guidelines apply to cyberspace research, even when data are gathered covertly. Human subjects research guidelines defining and mandating ethical pre/proscriptions function as more than regulations to which institutional recipients of federal grants must adhere. They also establish explicit conventions recognized by professionals as the minimal model of ethics for identifying subjects, acquiring data, protecting subjects' privacy and other legitimate interests, and writing or disseminating final results to the public.

DO WE NEED NEW GUIDELINES?

Schrum (1995) makes a strong argument for articulating new rules for the new electronic medium, and she identifies eleven guidelines for ethical electronic research. But, not all would agree that we need them. Are existing guidelines, such as those summarized above, sufficient to guide cyber-research? Or, as some argue, can we negotiate or append to them additional or alternative rules or principles that address the specific problems of the relatively new medium? The answer depends in part on whether one views cyberspace as so unique that current ethical standards lack the utility to address new questions. On this, there is disagreement.

STORM KING: King's essay provides the organizing theme around which participants here build and elaborate their own conceptions of research ethics. King, a doctoral candidate in clinical psychology, draws from his dissertation project on "virtual support groups" to illustrate the ethical dilemmas in shifting between the public realm of research revelation and the private arena of confidentiality. He argues that ethical problems in research may not always be immediately evident when a topic or field is new. Problems gradually arise, and individual researchers must be constantly vigilant for them and aware of ethical responsibilities to assure that no harm comes to subjects. He suggests that, because cyberspace is new, both technologically and as a research venue, we must establish new guidelines that recognize its uniqueness.

King focuses primarily on the relationship of the researcher to the subjects in electronic forums. His central thesis is that group accessibility in Internet forums dissolves the distinction between public and private places that normally guide scholars in following conventional guidelines of anonymity, confidentiality, or informed consent. As a consequence, the researcher, he argues, should initially confer to all electronic communications the status of "private" to assure that subjects are protected. However, he recognizes the difficulty that rigid adherence to this doctrine could raise, and tempers it by suggesting a continuum in which "the lower the level of Group accessibility and the higher the degree of Perceived Privacy, the more care must be taken to avoid harming group members." He argues in favor of "non-reactive" research methods that minimize intrusion into the setting. He concludes by offering concrete guidelines for research.

DENNIS WASKUL: Like King, Waskul draws from his dissertation studies to argue that, in cyberspace, conventional concepts of public and private dissolve, and one problem facing those who would "do right" requires formulating a new conception of "public space" that narrows the boundaries of what we consider "public." Waskul finds little merit in the arguments of those researchers who make an explicit distinction between public and private communications, and none in the claim that public Net postings may be treated the same as public behavior in, say, a public park. He is especially attentive to the possible false sense of anonymity that researchers may impute to electronic communications. Waskul narrows King's boundaries of the public/private spheres by arguing that online communicants may act privately even in public settings. As a consequence, data-gathering methods based on the public/private dichotomy "do not provide a sound basis for making sound ethical decisions that protect the interests of participants."

Both King and Waskul make impassioned and reasonable arguments for explicit rules. Others, however, find the commitment to invariant rules or guidelines restrictive, perhaps dogmatic, even containing the ironic potential to contribute to, rather than lead us out of, ethical lapses. This occurs in part because of the limitations of a deontological position in research settings with ambiguous meanings and conflicting norms, and in part because application of specific guidelines or principles to a narrow band of possible research methods

and problems limit their utility.

SHARON BOEHLEFELD: Boehlefeld draws both from her two decades as a journalist and her dissertation experiences to remind us that our ethical obligations extend beyond those owed to our research subjects. Ethical obligations include not only how we gather data, but also how we store and disseminate them. The Association of Computing Machinery (ACM) guidelines, she argues, provide a helpful framework for thinking about how researchers, systems administrators, and others with access to computer-generated information should attend to ethical issues. She identifies five attributes of communications media to challenge the blurred-boundaries thesis between public and private electronic discourse.

SUSAN HERRING: Where Boehlefeld urged us to remember the diversity of players in the research enterprise who are obligated to attend to ethical issues, Herring reminds us that there are also different types of research, and not all of them can be, or even ought to be, subject to rigid guidelines. Absolutist guidelines, she judges, can hamper research by ignoring the diversity and complexity of cyberspace and cyberspace scholarship. She builds her case with an analogy between tape-recorded and ASCII data collection.

Herring also distinguishes between data used primarily for textual analysis and data used to describe individual or group interaction. The latter invariably pose more ethical problems than the former because of the personal detail about participants they may provide. Drawing from research in her forthcoming edited volume (Herring, forthcoming), she cites linguistic positivism as an example of the type of research that would seem to pose minimal ethical problems. This occurs, she says, because the focus is on the structure and use of textual communication.

ELIZABETH REID: Reid identifies specific problems she encountered during her two years of MUD (Multiple User Dungeon) research. Her work reinforces the precept that courtesy, as well as ethics, ought be a methodological norm. She describes how and why she obtained consent prior to publishing the posts of her subjects. Reid describes an unusual problem: Her subjects appeared eager to be part of the study, and she was faced with the task of an abundance of potentially sensitive data that she had permission to publish, but that required cautious selection to protect the MUD participants. Reid also discovered a more subtle problem. After she left the field and disseminated her results both in print and on the Net, other researchers filled the vacuum created by her departure. This resulted in feelings of distrust and wariness amongst MUD participants, and participation declined. This adds another layer of ethical concerns on the research: What obligations do we have to minimize disruption, and how can especially participant observers enter and exit gracefully (Maines and Kappas, 1978).

CHRISTINA ALLEN: Allen provides the most provocative view of ethics in arguing that even reasonable ethical prescriptions risk "eroding the responsibility for ethical action on the

part of the researcher in every situation." Allen does not reject the authority of established rules as appropriate guidelines for ethical action. Instead, as with all rules, she believes that they need to be critically considered, re-accentuated and re-assimilated for each situation. For her, established codes are often the result of distilling ethical wisdom from past experiences, and as such, form an important ingredient to any ethical work in any situation. Drawing from Mikhail Bahktin, she argues that ethical precepts can and ought be negotiated by "engaging in creative 'ethical work' in situ, in dialogue with participants and perhaps other researchers, and throughout the research and publication processes." She argues that reliance on formal rules can break down in part because the researcher's perceptions and interpretations may not match those of subjects. She accepts Bahktin's dictum that "one cannot live ethically by reproducing established 'rhythms'," but must instead recognize each situation as one requiring receptivity to each unique context.

Her position suggests a blend of critical theory and postmodernism. Consistent with critical theorists such as Jurgen Habermas (1984), Allen's call for a negotiated ethics presupposes the possibility of power-free and consensual discourse in which all participants possess the will and the means to engage in dialogue and come to agreement on common understandings for action. In rejecting the "Golden Rule," Allen assumes the stance of Rorty's (1989: xiii) liberal ironist, for whom there is no easy answer to the question "why not be cruel?" Like Rorty and Bahktin, Allen implicitly suggests that ethics are grounded in a principle of solidarity to be realized in a vocabulary, rather than in a proposition.

JIM THOMAS: To illustrate why scholars and non-scholars alike should take an interest in research ethics, I conclude this selection of essays by describing a highly visible and seemingly innocent research project that contained serious ethical lapses. I argue that existing guidelines and principles, had they been observed at numerous gatekeeping points, could have prevented the problems. I suggest that, at root, three basic guidelines are sufficient to guide us in doing right: "Never put our subjects at risk, never lie to them, and minimize social harm while enhancing social good.

CONCLUSION

The offerings here illustrate how diverse ethical theories can lead to different views over which, or even whether, formal guidelines are needed for online research. King and Waskul, grounded in a deontological theories, argue that formal rules are needed. Boehlefeld, Herring, Reid, and Thomas, preferring a teleological approach, judge that broad principles of social good rather than invariant precepts are better. Allen, flirting with postmodernism, would privilege neither rules nor broad guidelines. Instead, she sees ethics as embedded within, and emerging out of dialogue with, the specific group under study. The authors make no effort to critique these positions in their essays. Rather, they lay out their position as it applies to their own research. They have, however, set up an electronic discussion group where critiques and comments can be debated or clarified. *TIS* readers are invited to join in

the discussion by sending this message:

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