# INTERNET RESEARCH ETHICS: NEW CONTEXTS, NEW CHALLENGES – NEW (RE)SOLUTIONS?

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**Abstract**
Especially the second set of AoIR guidelines for research ethics (Markham and Buchanan 2012) demonstrate that progress can be made in laying out useful approaches for analyzing and resolving at least very many of emerging ethical challenges facing Internet researchers.  But of course, new research possibilities, contexts, and approaches continue to issue in sometimes strikingly novel ethical

difficulties that may challenge in turn more established frameworks and guidelines. Critical to the ongoing development of Internet Research Ethics (IRE), then, is to bring forward new cases and difficulties that, as in previous cycles of guideline development, will serve as fruitful foci for reflection and deliberation that then contribute to both improving our abilities to respond to such new challenges and, eventually, the articulation of subsequent guidelines. Hence, our roundtable showcases important examples of contemporary research ethics issues – most especially as these are evoked by new research contexts and foci, and, in several instances, new methodological approaches. Our goal is to evoke dialogue and collective reflection on how these issues may be best resolved, and to thereby lift them up as reference points within and constituents of the evolving development of IRE.

Following brief presentations from each of our contributors, our two respondents, both long-time and prominent members of the AoIR ethics committee, will offer comments before then opening the roundtable to discussion with the audience.


## Presentations

**Yukari Seko (Postdoctoral Fellow, University of Guelph, Canada): Deathcasting and the Ethics of Online Imagery**
This presentation aims to ignite the critical discussion about the problems of user-generated images of pain and to illuminate ethical dilemmas of using such imagery for educational and research purposes. My discussion draws on a Swedish deathcasting in 2010, in which a young man hanged himself while live broadcasting over the Internet. The video was archived and extensively distributed over YouTube and other online depositories, later being reproduced as time-lapse videos and GIF images.

This deathcasting eloquently speaks of current digital environments in which (re)production and consumption of painful images distance (rather than connect) viewers from the suffering of others. Once uploaded online, one's private suicide has acquired an unprecedented global visibility and become a new spectacle to be consumed over and over by countless spectators. On one level, the user-generated nature of the deathcasting may raise social awareness and mobilize community efforts toward a grass-roots suicide intervention. Yet on the other, it flattens the embodied experience of suicide and potentially expands humiliation and degradation of the victim.

Given that the ethics of visual Internet research is still in its infancy, there is a pressing need to update our understanding of human sufferings visually presented and shared online. I will raise a series of questions: How can we, as researchers, educators, media producers and consumers, practice and teach ethical engagement with the body in pain online? If we decide to show, study or rework the painful images for the sake of research and teaching, is there an ethical way to re-circulate such images? And ultimately, what are the ways in which we can make the pain of others imaginable and sharable beyond material shareability of digital images?

**Katrin Tiidenberg (Tallinn University, Estonia): Nakedness and contextual ethics.**

Whenever conducting interview research, we have the opportunity (or the obligation) to follow the principles of informed consent and engage in an ongoing dialogue with our participants about what it is we want to know, do with what they tell us and publish. Conducting research that involves analysing explicit sexual content and images, this has been the only thinkable approach for me, and a comfortable one from a personal ethics standpoint. However, due to practical or methodical reasons, we may sometimes want to analyse the 'naturally occurring' data existing out there in the field without actually talking to people who have created and posted it.

This presentation explores the dilemmas and confusions of trying to follow the ethnographical principles of 'care' and the human subjects notion of 'no harm' when operating without informed consent. By comparing two research projects - one with Not Safe For Work (NSFW) self-shooters on tumblr and the other based on pregnant women's Instagram presentations - both of whom regularly post scantily clad images on non-password protected, technically public spaces – I will consider different ways of examining people's notions of privacy, tactics of audience segregation, and preferences regarding possible social convergence.

**Mary L. Gray (Microsoft Research): When Science, Consumer Rights, and Human Subjects Research Collide**
As more and more of researchers crisscross disciplines and work together to study or build better social media, we are pressed to rethink the basic methods and the ethical obligations that shape our work. Indeed "ethical dilemmas" are often signs that our methodological techniques are stretched too thin and failing us. When is something a "naturalistic experiment" if the data are always undergoing A/B tweaks? How do we determine consent if we are studying a commercial environment that is at once proprietary data, controllable, like a lab, and deeply social, like a backyard BBQ? When do we need to consider someone's information "private" if we have no way to know, for sure, what they want us to do with what we can see them doing? When, if ever, is it ok to play with someone's data if there's no evident harm but we have no way to clearly test the long-term impact on a nebulous number of end users? And how will we clarify the meanings of "original," "pre-existing," "secondary," and "found" human subjects data sets so that industry and university-based researchers using these data are held to the same ethical principles and practices? This talk will explore some of the challenges facing digital media research today and offer a path forward for reimagining the ethical obligations that come with studying digital domains.

**Camilla Granholm (University of Helsinki, Finland): "Online counseling as a part of social work practice; ethical challenges in research and practice"**
During the last two decades there has been a rapid development and a public demand for online services in the social and healthcare sector. Organizations that earlier have offered services offline are suddenly required to develop services for online use. In this process the foremost action has been to make sure that the online service is easy to find and navigate, and is user friendly. Questions about anonymity and confidentiality are often overlooked.

Cooperating with academia gives both public and non-governmental organizations and their services credibility. Researchers are often asked to evaluate the service by looking

at client contacts and response. This can lead to ethical dilemmas as the clients might not be informed of the fact that their online contact can be used for research purposes.

In the presentation I use examples of ethical problems occurring in my research on applying online tools in social work practice in Finland. My research spans nearly a decade and includes four sets of data, collected at different points in time between 2005 and 2014. The research therefore contributes by offering an insight on the change in the approaches to ICT among social work researchers and professionals over this time. In brief, the sub-studies show how the use of ICT, among both clients and organizations offering help and support has changed. The development has gone from services being asynchronous and private to involving more social and synchronous elements. This development reflects the development of ICT and how people implement it in their everyday lives in general. The research acknowledges both the opportunities and ethical challenges that the implementation of ICT brings for social work research and practice. In my presentation I will discuss and give some suggestions on how to tackle these ethical problems.

**Ylva Hård af Segerstad (Associate professor, University of Gothenburg, Sweden) and Dick Kasperowski (PhD, University of Gothenburg, Sweden):**
**Opportunities and Challenges of Studying Closed Communities Online: Digital Methods and Ethical Considerations**
In this presentation, we will discuss the methodological and ethical challenges of studying a closed community of bereaved parents on Facebook. The community that we are focusing on now has more than 1200 members, producing large amounts of data. We aim to collect data both on the aggregated level of the community and to follow individual trajectories, using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Each of the stages of data collection and analysis gives rise to a set of methodological and ethical challenges. Closed communities for sensitive topics such as this have to a large extent been inaccessible to researchers. What gives us access to the data is the fact that one of the researchers is a member in the closed community and that the grief support association organizing the closed group emphatically backs up the research project. This means that the researcher being a member of the community will act and have the function of being an "ethical representative" for the other researchers in the multidisciplinary project. Technically, we have tools and expertise to collect large amounts of data over a long period of time by scraping snapshots of content in the community. The data collection software will be configured to immediately replace real names with anonymized identifier strings. The content will then be processed using Natural Language Processing (NLP) tools for automatically categorising, understanding and summarising text and detecting emotions and sentiment.

The different stages in the research require different types of expertise from the research staff, and for the implementation of the project we are dependent on each and all of our collective competencies. One of the ways to address challenges on different levels throughout the project will be to use digital methods to give the staff different access levels to the data in combination with automatically anonymizing and analysing the data. However, where is the ethical challenge located when delegating research tasks to machines and algorithms? In the construction of algorithms? In deploying the

software? In interpreting results? This opens up questions of how research with digital methods configure ethical problems in unforeseen ways.

Furthermore, no matter whether we focus on the aggregated level or on the individual, we end up with large amounts of data collected in this context over time. Experience from our pilot study show that it is fairly straightforward to get informed consent to follow individual trajectories. However, given the amounts of data each individual is likely to produce over time in interaction with other community members, what are the implications for informed consent in such a sensitive area?
For better or worse, our study represents a kind of worst-case scenario for several reasons. The ethical and methodological challenges that arise when digital methods, i.e. technological possibilities for doing research, might clash with codes of research conduct as well as with human concern. In this presentation, we will focus on a number of issues that arise from these methodological and ethical points of departure.


**Reference**

Markham, A. & Buchanan, E. (2012). Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research: 2012. Recommendations from the AoIR Ethics Working Committee. <www.aoir.org/reports/ethics2.pdf>