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The Internet as a public arena for research: how do we balance the pursuit of knowledge with care for those we want to know?

My presentation is about the ethics of Internet research, especially with regard to vulnerable people, and the problems that arise from the models we use to conceptualise the environment in which we carry out our work.

It seems easy to grant that aside from some edge considerations, there is a sort of equivalence between face-to-face and online interactions, between physical and virtual spaces - particularly in academia, where our textual outputs are intended to be sufficient for the advancement of our work. The trade-offs seem to be marginal: some loss of informal face-to-face contact is off-set by the advantages of efficiency, speed, cost-saving, and maybe even innovation.

Indeed, the fact that we successfully import metaphors from the real world into the online world is what enables many different walks of life to achieve in digital environments what they would also normally manage in the real world. These are metaphors that aren't necessary properties of the web, but that we use to make it manageable: models from the material world such as pages and buttons, activities like surfing and networking, and concepts like sites and spaces. We call it cyberspace, and it can feel very like the other spaces we inhabit with our bodies.

I want to suggest that the easy equivalence we make between online and offline, and physical and virtual space, is much more problematic. This issue has arisen for me through considering some of the ethical problems that arise from using the ever-expanding wealth of raw material on the web as evidence in research.

I'm interested in how people use the online world when they are bereaved. As time goes by, more of us are exposed to death on the web - what to do with the Twitter accounts and Facebook profiles of loved ones who have died, online commemorative websites, and so on. How do people who are mourning loved ones use online spaces to express their grief, or seek out support from others? Photo-sharing sites have groups dedicated to expressing grief through images; fashion sites find themselves hosting users who repurpose the site tools to

discuss their loss; and forums dedicated to supporting bereavement through both informal support and professionalised services proliferate.

These phenomena raise questions about how seeking out online support might be helpful, perhaps through the chance to memorialise loved ones, or perhaps because sometimes the ambiguity of anonymous strangers on the web makes disclosure easier. Mourning is often a difficult subject to deal with in day-to-day life - we expect the grief-stricken to absent themselves from the office or social occasions until they are competent to cope with them. Unwelcome expressions of grief can be embarrassing or even seen as pathological. Do these questions of etiquette and emotion prevail online much as they do offline? Do online spaces provide therapeutic opportunities which might be more scarce in the fleshy world? Does the availability and peculiar permanence of online talk make mourning problematic – perhaps by extending the grieving period, or by exposing people to the trolls?

My research therefore is partly an investigation into the differences and similarities between virtual and real spaces. There are many comparable studies which ask this question through the lens of some specific issue, and there are guidelines as to how to deal with the ethics of this kind of research. After some reflection on some of those other studies, I have taken a somewhat hardline approach, and placed rather more burdensome ethical constraints on my research project than I might otherwise have done.

To explain these constraints, I'm going to mention a study from 2009 of an online space which is dedicated to the subject of gynecomastia – or the 'moob-job'. Men who are considering the procedure, undergoing it, or who are post-operative, regularly contribute to the site, which was studied by a group of psychologists in 2007, using interpretive phenomenological analysis to understand the experiences of these men. I wish to show that the ethical approaches and arguments they used, quite legitimately, are flawed in ways that force me to rethink the priorities at work in this sort of academic exercise. Perhaps even more than the bereaved, men with concerns about body image are a group who should not lightly be objectified by an academic project.

The authors cite the guidelines drawn up by the British Psychological Society for conducting research online. One might summarise them by saying that participants in Internet Mediated Research (IMR)

“can be identifiable or anonymous; they can explicitly consent to participate, or they can be invisibly observed without their knowledge.” (BPS, 2007)

The guidelines go on to state that strong justifications should be provided for covert non-participant observation – what we might in this context call “lurking” –

and that consent should be sought unless the environment is such that “people would ‘reasonably expect to be observed by strangers’.”

Exactly what criteria qualify public spaces as those in which people would reasonably expect to be observed is not specified in the BPS guidelines, but left to be established in the body of work which grows around the discipline.

The authors of our gynecomastia support group study note that -

“the key issue is whether people expect that their messages can be read by anyone without the need for a password or registration. If they are aware of this, then the data is brought into the public domain”

They also cite an earlier paper reporting about a website supporting anorexia nervosa which argued that:

“... such study of public messages is akin to naturalistic observation in a public space ... As public message boards are open to anyone with Internet access, the study of this Internet medium does not raise concerns of invading privacy.”

The study also notes the possible disruption that disclosing the investigators’ presence might cause to the integrity of the environment that they are studying. It is evident that they are trying to ensure that their work is ethically sound and demonstrates a care towards their subjects, and I don’t wish to imply otherwise. But I do want to suggest that this implementation of research guidelines is flawed because it wants to accept certain equivalences between the open internet and public space (such as a supposed ability to undertake naturalistic observation without disturbing the phenomenon being observed), but ignore non-equivalences (such as the fact that covert observation of such intimate communications is ordinarily impossible in public spaces, not least because open discussion of sensitive topics is very rare).

The study in question makes further trouble for itself where it creditably seeks to anonymise sources. Obfuscating quotes is generally thought to be a sound tactic in protecting the individuals who may have made their own efforts to conceal their ‘real-world’ identity in their online profiles, but may have done so inexpertly. They may, for example, have chosen an obscure ‘handle’ or login-name, but have nevertheless signed off posts with their actual forenames. To avoid these individuals being found via search engines, the authors state that they performed tests:

“Identifiability testing did take place ... in that direct quotes from individual posts were entered into Google; the results of

the searches did not include the original source message or website.”

This test sadly demonstrates a poor understanding of the operation of Google’s index: that it does not find sources at any given moment does not preclude the index being updated to include them at a subsequent date. Indeed when I searched Google for the quotations presented in the article, direct links to the original sources were listed. Again, this error does not show unethical behaviour: merely that an ethical guideline has been followed in letter but not necessarily understood in practice.

These critiques of the ethical approach take just some of the more obvious problems with abstract guidelines as they are implemented; and doesn’t even start to address other problems with lurking and appropriation, such as the hit counts, visible to site-admins, that researchers contribute to sites; or the eye-balls they bring which may in some cases contribute to advertising revenue; or the general tacit deceptions they must engage in simply to carry out observation.

I want to suggest that importing the metaphor of “public space” into an intimate online discussion is problematic because it buys the researcher the ethical justification they require, but largely ignores the epistemological and ethical non-equivalences. I’d argue that people simply don’t go online and talk to each other as though their words are being recorded and broadcast, and the permanent visibility of online discourse is a side-effect, rather than a primary concern, when it comes to a user’s motivation to participate in online discussions or contribute their creative work to a community. I’d prefer to argue that the actual space that the user occupies when contributing to an online forum plays a much more crucial role in determining the level of disclosure they are willing to engage in, not to mention the level of trust and intimacy that the visible community creates. This may often actually be the workplace, or bedroom, rather than a public space.

Even where forum users are in public spaces, there may be a huge mismatch between what they will willingly write in the context of a post from a mobile phone, and what they will say to the person sitting next to them. To discard these sorts of considerations is, I would argue, to make epistemological errors, as well as ethical mistakes, and ultimately is a consequence of prioritising the academic generation of knowledge over the well-being of subjects.

The consequence of these concerns for me is to adopt an alternative approach, which does not solve the problems raised, but swaps one set of challenges which I find ethically unjustifiable for another set which I am more willing to defend. So I will be making full disclosure in any online

spaces I enter before I undertake any observation; I will not be using material without the full informed consent of the original contributor; and in the event that any community feels my presence as a researcher to be intrusive enough to ask me to leave, I will promise to do so. This strategy at least offers the hope that the research process will be a consensual collaboration with participants, rather than a deceptive objectification of them: when dealing with communities of people we might class as vulnerable, this must surely be the preferable option.

So the project is now such that it makes no claim to be objective in a positivist sense, but rather is a fully-blown form of participative and ethnographic phenomenology. This brings another set of epistemological challenges and ethical quandaries, but I'd also suggest that Internet research which does choose to use covert observation may need to find alternative justifications.

REFERENCES

Report of the Working Party on Conducting Research on the Internet, 2007,
British Psychological Society, Leicester