

Research ethics in the virtual world

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Privacy was first defined in the *Harvard Law Review* in 1890 as 'the right to be let alone' (Warren & Brandeis 1890). Fast forward a century to 1999 and the chief executive of Sun Microsystems declared, 'You have zero privacy. Get over it' (McNealy 1999). So, is privacy a defunct concept for the Surveillance Society we now live in? I, for one, hope not.

Interestingly, legal experts such as Alan Westin (1967a, 1967b) began to create a framework for regulating data collection in the computer age as early as the 1960s. Westin introduced the idea of *control* and proposed that consumers should exercise intellectual property rights over the collection and usage of personal data. More recently this framework has come to include the idea of *knowledge*, with Foxman and Kilcoyne (1993) distinguishing 'privacy states operationally on the basis of who controls consumer data and whether or not consumers are informed about data collection and privacy rights'. The MRS Code of Conduct (2005) rests firmly on these principles of control and knowledge: 'respondents' co-operation is voluntary and must be based on adequate, and not misleading, information' (fourth principle of the Code).

But what happens to these principles of knowledge and control when it comes to consumer data on the internet? Mike Cooke (2008) summed up the question well, 'If we can collect

vast amounts of data passively without the individual being aware of the data trail they are leaving, does that give researchers the right to use it for other purposes?' Some researchers answer a resounding yes, and see chat rooms, forums and blogs as the ideal setting to conduct unbiased ethnography by 'lurking' at the sites of interest without announcing their presence. However, this would seem to be contrary to the Code (MRS 2005), whose clause B.19 states, 'Members must ensure that respondents are able to check without difficulty the identity and bona fides of any individual and/or their employer conducting a research project.' If the researcher is 'lurking' this is not possible.

And what of postings on social networking sites? One view within the research community seems to be that postings and blogs are 'published material'. However, bloggers and networkers might not see it in quite the same way. Teenagers often rue what they have written when they realise employers and university admissions tutors are able to view their 'published' outpourings. One 14 year old put it like this when asked about privacy on social networking sites: 'Initial thoughts – who cares? Subsequent thoughts – omg!' Indeed, clause B.18 of the Code (MRS 2005) states that 'A respondent's right to withdraw from a research project at any stage must be respected.' It's hard to see how this can be honoured when the respondent has no idea that s/he is part of a research project.

The second part of the presentation looked at the ethical implications of researching children on the internet. The third principle of the MRS Code of Conduct (2005) states that 'market

researchers will take special care when carrying out research among children'. One way in which children's rights and data are protected is by ensuring that parental consent is obtained from under-16s. However, this method of protection presents an enormous challenge in cyberspace for two reasons. First, it is hard to know how old people really are, as children (and adults) can claim to be any age they wish. As one 13-year-old girl in our book (Mayo & Nairn 2009) told us, 'On all of my addresses, I'm 20. Games, Bebo. If you want to go on a website you lie about your age.' Second, children are often resistant to any parental involvement in their online world. A recent study showed that 69% of 9–17 year olds resent their parents monitoring their computer use, and 63% of 12–19 year olds hide their online activities from their parents (Livingstone & Bober 2005). Just as children can easily lie about their age on the internet, so, too, can they provide a fake 'parental' email address, which they can routinely use to give 'parental' consent.

According to the United National Convention on the Rights of the Child (1980), in addition to the right to protection, children also have the right to participation. Children have the right to have their views heard through research – online or offline. The research community has a challenge ahead of it in finding regulatory systems that are able to adequately balance these two rights.

The presentation ended by suggesting that in order to abide by the spirit of the Code (MRS 2005), researchers should be able to answer in the affirmative to the following questions.

- Are my research intentions transparent?
- Has the respondent given informed consent?
- Can I verify the age of my respondent?
- Can I verify that I have parental permission of under-16s?

It is important that the research community address the issue of ethics in the virtual world, as public trust of market researchers is already very low. In a recent EU survey (Eurobarometer 2008) only 25% of the UK public said they trusted market research agencies as far as data protection is concerned. Any reduction in the transparency of researchers' activities will surely only serve to reduce this figure further.

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