

Ethical Aspects of Research in a Web Chat Community.

A case study for Ethics Working Group, Association of Internet Researchers.

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Introduction

In the modern society, many people live under temporal and spatial constraints. They may be separated from friends and family by geographic location or they may have antisocial working hours. Some times, the urban environments impose difficulties for contacting and getting to know other individuals. In this light, we may see the Internet-based environments for social interaction as creative and innovative solutions for the need of socializing (Stone, 1991). A new and unexpected field has emerged: social environments in which people still meet face to face, but under new definitions of “meet” and “face” (Stone, 1991:85).

Using communication media in order to bridge over physical and spatial limitations is not a new phenomenon, and people have, at least during the last centuries been able to communicate through means such as letters, telegraph and telephone. Even though the Internet has some properties in common with these earlier communication tools, it has also certain characteristics that cannot be found in earlier media. One of these is that it drastically increases the amount of individuals to which a relationship can be established, far beyond the limits being posed by physical or social proximity and even beyond the wider horizons we have come to have through other modern communication media (Lea & Spears, 1995). As for other media, we have been forced to choose between either reaching many individuals (mass media), or having a personal relationship (letters and telephone), while on the Internet, we can have both.

The Internet enables us to seek information and to communicate with each other, but it also provides us with new ways to meet and create relationships to other individuals. In some Internet arenas, like for example Newsgroups, the creation of personal relationships to other users may develop as time goes on, while in others, like for example web chat, the main purpose is to fulfill the needs for social interaction. The users of such environments interact

with each other, often on a regular basis, and despite the fact that most of them have no idea of who others are in their offline identities, they form relationships and have feelings for each other. A sense of belonging often develops, and the users are often deeply attached to their online environments, friends and activities (cf. Turkle, 1995). By their participation in the online environment, they come to share values, ideas and perspectives.

For a long time, discussions about the Internet and computer-mediated communication (CMC) focused on how organizations could benefit from it in various ways (Lee, 1996). Apart from technical considerations concerning design and implementations, research about CMC was mostly directed towards commercial matters. The role of CMC for problem-solving, decision-making and business-structure was discussed (Dubrovsky, Kiesler & Sethna, 1991; Barnes & Geller, 1994), while research about social interaction, online communities or personal relationships maintained through CMC for a long time was absent. However, the latest five years, the flow of scholarly literature on the Internet has increased dramatically, and volumes that cover such matters have been published (for example Herring, 1996; Jones, 1998; 1997; 1995; Kiesler, 1997; Porter, 1997; Shields, 1996; Smith & Kollock, 1999; Sudweeks, McLaughlin & Rafaeli, 1998, Cherny, 1999).

An increasing number of scholars are conducting research on issues referred to as 'Internet culture', and my thesis should be seen as a contribution to that field. With 'culture', I join Hannerz' (1982) definition of "a mutual, shared and socially acquired consciousness, distributed and maintained through communication" (1982:59). Culture thereby includes shared knowledge, values, experiences and ways of thinking. According to Hannerz, viewing human life in cultural terms means emphasizing collective consciousness and the communications that support it. The consciousness becomes shared through communicating, through sharing a language and understanding its codes and messages. The shared consciousness also include views of the surrounding world as filled with meaning in a way that is similar for everybody, or at least many within the culture. Regarding the Internet communities that have evolved as cultures makes it motivated to use ethnographic method, and an increasing number of articles within the field of 'Internet culture' address issues of so called 'online ethnography' (for example Paccagnella, 1997). This is also the approach I have chosen to take, combined with in depth offline interviews with users.

My thesis aims at exploring one of the Internet's environments where people meet and socialize with other individuals, namely web chat. Previous research on social interaction online has in most cases been conducted in environments such as MUDs, MOOs and IRC (for example Reid, 1991; 1995; Danet et al., 1998; Markham, 1998; Rintel & Pittam, 1997; Turkle, 1995, Pargman, 2000), while articles on web chat are few (e.g. Karlsson, 1997a; 1997b; Hård af Segerstad, 2000). Since web chat is a forum that is designed specifically for social interaction, the lack of research on it is surprising. Where environments such as MUDs often attract users who are interested in programming, and Newsgroups attract users who are

interested in discussing a certain subject, the user friendly web chat aims at users who may not always know a lot about the technology, but whose main interest lies in the social interaction per se. When talking about social interaction in online environments, web chat should therefore not be neglected.

Aim

This is an explorative, inductive study, where the ultimate purpose can be described as approaching the field of web chat as free from any preconceived ideas as possible, in order to find out what chatting as activity is about. I went out to study what goes on in the chat rooms, and how the social interaction is managed. I was also curious about the users' experiences and reflections about this form of interaction.

During the work I gradually became aware of the feelings of community and cohesion among habitual users. A theme that turned out to be central is the regular chat-users' sense of community, which is expressed through shared outlooks and perspectives, as well as through communicative styles, values, ideals and norms of behavior. In my data, issues of inclusion and exclusion and the drawing of boundaries against other types of users were also apparent. This dissertation is aimed to understand how regular web chat users create a sense of community through

- a) their views of themselves and other users
- b) their activities in the chat rooms
- c) their communicative styles
- d) their implicit rules of behavior

Method

In this thesis, I have assumed an inductive approach, meaning that patterns, themes and categories are allowed to emerge from data, rather than from preconceived questions and hypotheses. Neither did I have any theoretical *points of departure*, but rather assembled and read through theories along the way. As patterns emerged from data, I picked up theories that related to these issues. Of course, it is not possible (or even desirable) to walk into a research situation with a totally empty mind, and the researcher will always bring his/her previous knowledge and ideas about the world, which will influence both what s/he sees and how s/he interprets it. Working inductively, I would rather describe as the absence of any hypotheses that is to be tested, or any grand theory that is directing the work from the very first beginning, but instead that empirical studies precede and lead to the formulation of such hypotheses. In this way, empirical studies make it possible to either formulate new theories as in Grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), or to direct the researcher to certain existing theories, as in this study.

I have gathered my data through two separate methods: interviews and observations. I chose to combine these two, since none of them alone would let me grasp both the social interaction in web chats and the users' experiences of it. Using interviews was a way of getting insights into users' experiences and views on this way of interacting, while I judged observations to be a better way of getting insights into what really happens and how participants actually handle interaction in chat rooms. The study thus deals with both the rhetoric and the actions related to chatting, i.e. what people do and what they say that they do. The two respective methods also worked as a source of inspiration for each other, where the interviews provided me with ideas of what could be essential to look for in the observations, and vice versa. Even though I have strived to taking on an insider's perspective, I realize that what I have done would be better described as a swinging to and fro; in and out of the informants' and users' perspective, and therefore the approach can be said to be both emic (insider's perspective) and etic (researcher's perspective) (Patton, 1990:241).

The interviews were with fourteen Swedish experienced web chat users, and focus was on their experiences of their chatting. Since the field is relatively un-mapped, I wanted to approach it as free from any preconceived ideas as possible, and I therefore chose to make semi-structured interviews. The observations were made in a Swedish web chat room. For ethical reasons, I have chosen to not reveal its name, but will in the following text refer to it as the Cloudberry chat. As a way of triangulation, I used the opportunity of asking my informants about the patterns of interaction I had found in my observations, and after the interviews were made, I also returned to the observation transcripts to look for support or contradictions to what the informants had talked about. During the course of analysis, I have also e-mailed the informants concerning questions that were invoked by the data. In some cases, I wanted to check with the informants whether they as users agreed with my interpretations, and in others, the questions were about issues I had not yet discovered at the time for that interview.

The relation between the observed chat room and the chat rooms mentioned in the interviews is as follows: it is true that most of my informants were more or less sporadic users of several chat rooms, but their main chatting was concentrated to three smaller chat rooms (in the following text called the Cloudberry-, Seashore- and Otherside chat).

Informant	Main chat room
Anna	Otherside
Anders	Otherside
Mimmi	Otherside

Rickard	Otherside
Åsa	Otherside
Annika	Cloudberry + American chat room
Anton	Otherside + Cloudberry + American chat room
Robert	American chat room
Alex	Cloudberry + Kajen
Olle	Cloudberry + Seashore
Dan	Seashore
Ingela	Passagen, Aftonbladet
Ellen	Passagen
Tomas	Cloudberry

As we see, five of the informants participated to some extent in the Cloudberry chat room, and two of them (Alex and Tomas) can be characterized as central persons within the environment, i.e., they were regulars and recognized by most other users there. Both of these two informants were present during some of my observations, and can therefore be found in some of the chat excerpts within my thesis. The informants' presence during the observations was not planned. In some of the occasions, they knew that I was there, gathering data, while not in others. For ethical reasons, even if it is interesting to see the actual interplay between what one specific informant says during an interview and what s/he is actually doing when online, I have chosen not to reveal under what usernames from the observation data Alex and Tomas are found.

Ethical Considerations – the Interviews

Already by the first contact, taken through e-mail, I was careful to inform about HSFR's¹ ethical principles, and I emphasized the right of self-determination, i.e. the informants' right to decide whether, for how long, and on what conditions they would participate in the study. Since this is an explorative study, it was difficult to specify the purpose of the study, more than a general interest in social interaction managed through web chat. The informants were also informed about the requirement of confidentiality and of autonomy, i.e. that they will not be identifiable, and the gathered information will only be used for research. As has already been mentioned, the chat rooms mentioned in the interviews, that the informants used to an essential extent, are referred to as the Cloudberry-, Seashore- and Otherside chat. In the cases

¹ The Swedish Council for Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences.

where the informants talk about other chat rooms, such as for example Kajen, Passagen, Aftonbladet or Expressen², I have chosen to call them by their right names, since they are very large chat rooms with a great flowing through of users³, and the informants cannot be identified by this information.

I offered to send the transcribed interviews to all informants, in order for them to have the opportunity to read through the interviews, and perhaps also delete delicate information. Eight of the informants took this opportunity, and out of them, only one wanted to delete certain parts of the interview. The deleted parts consisted of a few utterances that the informant allowed me to use for my analysis, but not to quote within the text.

Ethical Considerations – the Observations

Paccagnella (1997) describes the problems that can arise in relation to observations. Phenomena are likely to change when one observes them, and a researcher's presence often influences the environment studied. Many problems of validity and reliability in observations concern the effects that the researcher might have on the individuals being studied, and it is argued that people who know that they are observed behave differently than they otherwise would. Consequently, hidden observations are argued to catch the environment as it normally looks like better than observations where the participants know that they are observed (Patton, 1990). In connection to this, Paccagnella (ibid.) discusses the opportunities that computer-mediated communication offers of studying interaction un-noticed and thus avoiding to influence the situation. This of course evokes new questions of research ethics.

HSFR's policies for research ethics establish norms for the relations between researcher and participants in studies, the essence being that individuals who participate in research must not be harmed, either physically or mentally, humiliated or offended (the claim for individual protection). Within the claim for individual protection, there are four main requirements:

- 1) The informational requirement, stating that the researcher shall, at least in delicate situations, inform about his or her activity, and gain consent from the affected;
- 2) The requirement of consent, stating that the participants should have the right to decide whether, for how long, and on what conditions they will take part;
- 3) The confidentiality requirement, stating that participants should be given highest confidentiality possible, and that personal information should be stored in a way that hinders unauthorized to take part of it. All information should also be registered,

² Swedish web chat rooms managed by large media companies.

³ By the time of one of the informants' last chat-session, there were 1400 persons logged on to Passagen's chat-pages and this number is not unusually high for the chat room.

stored and reported confidentially, and in forms where identification of individuals cannot be done;

- 4) The requirement of restricted use, stating that the data gathered must not be used for other purposes than research.

Requirement of Consent

In many aspects, the communication in web chat rooms resembles multi-party telephone conversations (telephone chat lines), of the kind that used to be called “Heta Linjen” (the Hot Line) in Sweden. This way of interaction was very popular among young people in Sweden during the 1980’s. These multiparty telephone conversations should not be confused with what is now usually referred to as hot lines, where the main purpose seems to be phone sex. The former ones consisted in telephone-numbers which had no subscriber, and to which people could call without their telephone bills being charged. The knowledge of those numbers was spread through personal communication between young people, and can indeed be seen as one of many strategies to avoid the governance of adults and organizations, since these media provided a free and un-moderated space, in which adults had little insight. Several individuals could call one hot-line number at the same time and engage in multi-party conversation or find new friends. The discourse was characterized by a jumble of voices shouting “Hello?” “Hello?” “Hello?” ”Who are you?” “What’s your name?” “Hello?” and so on, and callers often exchanged telephone numbers already in the initial stage, and called each other’s personal telephone numbers in order to be able to have a more coherent conversation. Telephone chat lines thus had many similarities with web chat interaction, except for the obvious difference that chat occurs through computers and through written instead of spoken language.

Web chat software does not store messages, but transfers the sender’s message directly to the screens of all other users. There are often many users in the chat rooms, and they enter and disappear in a very fast pace. The opportunities of informing and gaining consent of all participants are therefore extremely small, if not even non-existing. Posting messages aiming to get informed consent from each new individual who logged on would not only have taken up so much of the limited space that it completely destroyed the situation I wanted to study, but the users would probably also get so annoyed with the disturbance that they left the chat room. A compromise could be to ask for permission only from the users who were present when I first logged on. I would then miss the users who logged on later than I. In fact, during my first observations, I tried to do this. In connection to my entrance, I posted a paragraph presenting myself, and stating what my purpose of research was, just to find that almost no one reacted. I got one single reply, saying “Sure, go ahead!”. However, my posting made the one person who reacted and consented to start to ask me questions about my research, to the extent that I was not able to collect any data.

A way to get all users' consent could have been to post a private message to each user who logged on, but since users come and disappear so fast, it is hardly possible to keep track on everyone, and this would also have made me unable to in fact collect any data (see paragraph on saving data below). I could also have created a chat room of my own, or within an already existing chat room create a private room, and send out an invitation in the public chat room, at the same time as informing about research being done. This would, however, probably have resulted in the same kind of scenario as the one referred to above, namely that I as researcher would get in the center of the users' attention, which I did not wish. Such a procedure also evokes other questions, relating to issues of reliability and quality of research. One does not know a) whether anyone will join the research chat room, b) who will come and for what reason, or c) whether these persons really behave as they normally would. Constructed, experimental environments have often been used within research of computer-mediated communication, and have been strongly criticized (e.g. Wildermuth, 2001).

The type of chat rooms that I wanted to study is open and accessible to anyone with Internet access, and no membership is required. Anyone who logs on can read messages and observe what happens, without others being aware of his/her presence (cf. the opportunity of the "Hot Line" of just calling up and listen to others). For those who do not wish to show their messages to the public, there are several opportunities of either hiding themselves or their messages. In most chat rooms, users can "go private" with one or several other users, which means that they create a sub-room within the chat room, to which only they and the people they invite have access. When they do so, other users can neither see their nicknames nor their messages. In the chat room I studied, it is also possible to send private messages, at the same time as being in the public room, and these messages will only be visible to the addressee. Hence, the interaction that occurs in the public room is open and visible to just anyone, and participants are aware of this. King (2000) suggests that ethical considerations related to Internet data should be judged on two dimensions, how public the forum is perceived to be and how delicate the information shared is. The public room of chat rooms is perceived as an open space, and therefore, delicate information is normally not shared there.

The Confidentiality Requirement

The confidentiality requirement is for natural reasons easier to satisfy, since even I am unknowing of whom I am studying. When users log on to a chat room, they choose a nickname, a name with which they wish to present themselves. One can choose one's own offline name, and many nicknames do indeed consist of a first name, possibly in combination with age (for example "Lina22"). It is, however, more usual that users come up with own, more personal signatures, that can provide information about properties such as gender, age, interests, musical or political preferences, profession, ideals, civil status, or even sexual preferences. Such information does not need to be in accordance with the offline reality, but it can rather reveal something about the users' ideals, and how they wish to be perceived by other users (for more about nicknames, see Sveningsson, 2001, or Bechar-Israeli, 1999). Even

if all users are anonymous, in the meaning that I do not know what offline identities hide behind the nicknames, the nicknames that occur in my observation data may of course be recognized by other users, especially since users often have more or less permanent nicknames that they always stick to. This is especially true in small chat rooms with many regulars, i.e. the type of chat rooms that I chose to study. Donath (1999) therefore argues that what can be found in online-environments is not anonymity, but pseudonymity. For many users, the community of a chat room can often be experienced as just as real as their other environments, and their online-identities can then, when in the chat room, be just as real as their offline-identities when in offline environments. Those who argue for an uncritical rendering of observation data from chat rooms with the opportunity for users to remain anonymous, or to change nicknames, have not taken into account that users who have developed relationships to other individuals in a certain environment (in this case a chat room) will likely want to continue meeting and interacting with them under the name they have made themselves known. Renderings of data should therefore only be done after strict considerations of whether individuals could be identified, both in their on- and offline roles, and in that case, if the information that is left out could harm the person in question. My attitude towards this has been that the fact that users are in the chat room cannot be seen as delicate information, and I have therefore chose to keep the users real online nicknames as example of what type of nicknames people chose. This should also be seen as a way of preserving authenticity of data. In order to avoid individual nicknames to be seen in relation to delicate information, I have made strict considerations when quoting actions, utterances or conversations. I have also changed personal information that occurred in the conversations, relating to offline-identities, such as real names, cities of residence and descriptions of appearances. Only people who know the users' online-names can identify their online identities. Identification of their offline identities, on the other hand, requires that one knows both who they are online- and offline. It is also important to keep in mind that I do not follow any specific individuals, but my interest has rather been on the interaction, discourse and activity of chatting.

My observations have been hidden to most of the users in the chat room. Even though I in that way do not satisfy the informational requirement, I refer to the main requirement of HSNR's ethical policies, namely the the claim for individual protection. I would say that the users of the chat room I have studied are not subject to physical or mental harm, humiliation or offense as a result of my research. Another circumstance is that the observations were made almost four years prior to the publishing of this thesis, which makes identification of nicknames even more difficult.

Conclusion/Further Questions

Doing ethnographic research in Internet environments clearly evokes new questions of research ethics, but it may also alter the way we look upon old guidelines. In this paper, for example, we have seen how many of the established rules and guidelines for how research in

the humanities should be conducted are overridden. The Internet media may sometimes make it easier to conduct research unnoticed, but above all, as we have seen in this paper, they may make it very difficult to ask for permission by the individuals who are under study.

Even though I finally made the decisions to conduct research that did not satisfy all of HSFR's guidelines, I first had to think it over for about two years before actually daring to use the material I had collected. I am still by no means convinced that it was the right thing to do. On the one hand, it can be argued that no one was harmed by my research. On the other, I hold that people really should have the right to know that they are subject to research, as well as have the opportunity to decide whether they will participate in the study or not. With this paper, I hope to open up a discussion of issues of informed consent in Internet environments. Is it possible to get it, and is it really necessary?

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