English Translation[1] of:
NESH's "Research ethics guidelines for internet research"
(Source: http://www.etikkom.no/retningslinjer/internett)

Decided upon and approved by the national research ethics committee for social sciences and humanities, 24. Sept. 2003-11-01

1. The value of internet research

With internet research is meant both research into phenomena on the net (for example, internet culture) and research which uses the net as a tool for research (for example, as a channel for making contact with informants). These are not necessarily the same. Research on internet culture can be carried out by use of face to face interviews, and research which uses the internet can focus on phenomena that do not occur on the net.

Research on the internet is valuable, not only because it can provide insight into a new and important communication channel, but also because the net opens up the possibility to study known phenomena (for example, the formation of norms, diffusion of information, communication, and the formation of groups) in new ways. This kind of research is also valuable as it provides knowledge about which laws are effective - or ought to be effective - in internet research.

2. The internet's multiplicity

Communication on the internet takes place through complex technological systems, and there are massive differences within these systems. Research on communication on the internet can occur through e.g. electronic post, text-based multi-user systems, discussion groups, chat rooms, in connection to computer games, internet webpages, search engines, logfiles and other "accounting" systems, e-mails listservs, and newsgroups.

The technological systems vary in different ways. A distinction can be made between channels which constitutes the foundation of synchronous communication (text-based multi-user systems, chat rooms, computer games) and channels of asynchronous communication (e-mail, discussion groups, news groups and internet webpages). Another dimension is to what extent the communication occurs one-on-one (e-mail, private rooms and private channels in text-based multi-user systems and chat rooms), many-to-many (discussion groups, communication within games) or one-to-many (internet webpages, newsgroups). Access to the different channels of the internet also varies from encrypted e-mails to internet webpages which can be read by everybody. A great part of electronic fora are accessible by the interested users, but some fora have restricted access. The rights one has in the forum are often decisive for which approach one takes to [protecting] information. Another [important] difference between the diverse technological systems of the internet is whether data is stored permanently or not.

3. Internet research is subject to the same ethical demands as other research.
The general ethical demands which apply to research in social sciences, the humanities, and law also hold for research on the net [*endnote 1*]. Therefore the research-ethical considerations, as expressed in delineations A to F, are relevant in relation to research on the internet. However, the distinctiveness of the net does give rise to a few special considerations the researcher ought to be aware of.

4. The difficulties with distinguishing between public and private information [*endnote 2*].
As a first rule – information that one counts as public can freely be used for research purposes. However, it is difficult to clearly distinguish between what should be counted as private and what should be counted as public information in relation to information gathered from the internet. One reason for this is that information which is accessible for everybody with access to the internet can be of an extremely private character.

Even though information communicated in an open forum is of a private character, a researcher will - as a first rule - freely be able to use that information for research purposes. However, the researcher should carefully consider the applicable rules [*aktsomhetshensyn*] mentioned in article 6 and 8 [*endnote 3*].

As a general rule, researchers can freely use material from open fora without getting [informed] consent from the persons who have produced the information or from the persons the information is about. For example, a researcher can freely use information gathered from the coverage of an occurrence by an online newspaper. The consideration of respect for participants in open fora nonetheless implies that researchers ought to inform participants of any systematic registration (for example, a recording) or reporting of information when possible.

5. Internet fora with access limitations
Some internet fora have access limitations. Since information conveyed in such fora is not accessible to everyone, the consideration of respect for participants implies that the researcher cannot freely use such information for research purposes. As a general rule, such information should therefore not be used for research purposes without the researcher acquiring the participants' consent.

There is a distinction between whether the researcher simply collects information, or whether he/she actively participates in the forum. The researcher ought to publicly identify him/herself if he/she is participating actively in a forum with limited access. However, there can also be grounds for the researcher to identify him/herself if he/she collects information without actively participating in the forum.

Regardless of the researcher's degree of activity, the researcher must take into account possible rules of behavior that might apply in the forum [*endnote 4*].

The access restrictions for different internet fora can be more or less strict. The stricter the access restrictions of the fora are the stronger will the participants' expectations of protection be. As researcher one ought to be attentive to how strict the demands of access are for the forum under study. The stricter the access limitations, the greater attention to any applicable rules [*aktsomhetshensyn*] researchers ought to show.

6. Use of personal and sensitive materials.
Interactions in digital fora often have an ephemeral character. This contributes to creating expectations about information being protected. People can be willing to contribute personal and sensitive information to an internet forum, which in principle is accessible for anyone - without thereby having meant that their statements could be spread further.

Persons about whom personal or sensitive information is available in an open forum have a right to be ensured that the information is being used and communicated in a appropriate way in connection to research [*endnote 5*]. Living persons also have a right to control whether sensitive information about themselves may be used in relation to research [*endnote 6*]. The possibilities of tracing the informant's identity are made easier using digital fora than by use of other information channels (cf. article 8). Researchers must anonymize any sensitive information they use.

7. About obtaining [informed] consent in digital fora [*endnote 7*]
Article 8 in the NESH guidelines includes a first rule: Research projects which depend on active participation must take place only after the participants' free and informed consent has been obtained. In other words; the researcher must himself assess relevant considerations and decide whether it is necessary to obtain consent to a certain research project - or not. This first rule also applies to internet research.

There are many difficulties in connection with obtaining informed consent in digital fora. First of all, an enquiry about informed consent in relation to participatory observation can be destructive for the interaction the researcher wants to study. Secondly, the participation is ephemeral, which makes it difficult to reach the persons from whom one wishes to obtain the informed consent. Thirdly, people can pretend to be someone else online. This means the researcher cannot be sure that the obtained informed consent derives from the person the researcher wants the consent from.

In the instances where it is necessary to obtain consent the above mentioned practical problems make demands on the planning of the research. Obtaining consent via the internet requires a greater effort in ensuring the quality of the consent. It entails more comprehensive precautions in ensuring no recruiting of persons who should not participate in the research, for example child participation in an adult investigation. It can also be a great challenge to make sure participants in the internet research have an adequate understanding of the information when it solely is communicated in words on

the net. In some situations the problems regarding obtaining informed consent mean the researcher ought to refrain from investigating the forum.

8. Use of quotes gathered from the internet
When using quotes from the internet in relation to publication of research results, the researcher should carefully consider the fact that it is possible to trace informants' identity by use of a full text search on the quotes.

9. The child's right to protection
Research on children's and young people's use of the internet contributes to greater understanding of important aspects of their culture and upbringing. This kind of research raises special challenges because it is part of children's activities, which are often outside adult control, and because the boundary between the world of the children and the adult world is not always clear. However, this does not reduce the demands of obtaining parents' consent for children's participation in research, even though it is more difficult as a practical matter. In some instances it can be easier to safeguard the considerations of the child's right to protection by conducting the research offline, for example by interviewing the child about his/her use of the internet, face-to-face

10. Pseudonyms and confidentiality
Pseudonyms ('nicknames') are an important part of the interaction on the internet. Often such pseudonyms function as ordinary names and they are often used in different fora and in different connections. Many users have an interest in how their digital identity is being treated. The researcher should carefully consider the fact that informants do not necessarily consider personal information anonymized if the researcher uses their pseudonyms.

11. Requirements concerning reporting research results back to participants
Many of the most interesting social and cultural movements on the internet are built on norms of openness, freedom of information, and the sharing of results. In connection to internet research on such digital communities, a special responsibility arises for reporting research results to the participants of an investigation.

Endnotes

[1] The same juridical norms that apply to such research also apply to internet research. When turning the internet into a subject of research it will often involve more than one jurisdiction. In other words; researchers must be aware that other countries' laws can also apply to the net.

[2] The distinction between the use of so-called private and public information is not necessarily the same within internet research and law. From a juridical perspective a certain work will be regarded as public when accessible on the internet, but from this does not automatically follow that the researcher is ethically free in using the work.

[3] The researcher must also take into consideration that most material published on the internet is protected by copyright laws, which means that it cannot simply be utilized without further ado.

[4] This principle has been established on different web pages. See for example: http://www.nettnemda.no/netregler.html. The limitation of access also represents an explicit assertion of the conditions that the moderator gives for the utilization of the material (see also endnote 2). The limitations do not necessarily need to be stated in comprehensible text on the website but can be stated in other ways, for example as html-code

[5] See articles 13, 14, and 15 in the NESH guidelines

[6] See articles 12 in the NESH guidelines

[7] See also article 8 in the NESH guidelines regarding consent and law about personal information [*personsoplysningsloven*] §§ 8, 9, and 11. As a juridical point of departure, all handling of information on persons must be based on consent independent of the source of the information.

[8] See also the law concerning intellectual work [*åndsverksloven*] § 22

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[1] [Permission to post to AoIR ethics working committee and AoIR members received from Hilde Nagell, <hilde.nagell@etikkom.no>, 21 Nov. 2003]