

# **INTRODUCTION TO INTERNET-BASED RESEARCH**

**FALL 2021**

**Week 13: Final Session**

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# On The Agenda For Today

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- Internet Research Ethics
- Challenges of using internet-based research for academic purposes
- The final papers



# Internet Research Ethics

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- Internet as a **tool + medium** for research
- **Tool**=> Search engines, databases, indices (information and content) ...
- **Medium** =>
  - Observing content (blogs, social networks, chat rooms, newsgroups, etc.)
  - Active research (Mturk, using Google forms for surveys, Wextor/other platforms to conduct experiments, etc.)

# Internet Research Ethics

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- The commonly accepted definition of **Internet research ethics** has been first used by Ess & Association of Internet Researchers (2002):
  - **The analysis of ethical issues & application of research ethics principles as they pertain to research conducted on and in the Internet**
  - Internet-based research, broadly defined, is **research which utilizes the Internet to collect information through an online tool**, such as an online survey; studies about how people use the Internet, e.g., through collecting data and/or examining activities in or on any online environments; and/or, uses of online datasets.



# Institutional Review Boards (IRB)

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- In response to several **ethical controversies** when conducting **research**, the American Congress passed the ‘**National Research Act**’ (1974)
- Established the “**National Commission for Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research**”

## *Institutional Review Board Guidebook*

*\* CHAPTER III \*  
BASIC IRB REVIEW*

### **A. RISK/BENEFIT ANALYSIS**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Risks to research subjects posed by participation in research should be justified by the anticipated benefits to the subjects or society. This requirement is clearly stated in all codes of research ethics, and is central to the federal regulations. One of the major responsibilities of the IRB, therefore, is to assess the risks and benefits of proposed research.

#### **DEFINITIONS**

**Benefit:** A valued or desired outcome; an advantage.

**Minimal Risk:** A risk is minimal where the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the proposed research are not greater, in and of themselves, than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests [Federal Policy § \_\_.102(i)]. For example, the risk of drawing a small

# Institutional Review Boards (IRB)

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- The IRB is meant to ensure the **protection, safety & welfare** of **human subjects**
- Overseen by the **Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP)**, under the Department of Health and Human Services
- Each IRB Committee is composed of scientists, non-scientists + community members





# Internet Research Ethics

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Issues to Consider =>



# Internet Research Ethics

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## Cases to Consider =>

- A researcher using the website "Gay Bombay" to study gay Indian men's attitudes. The board was worried- since homosexuality is illegal in India, participation would potentially get the respondents in trouble
- A researcher wanted to use a public list archive, but in order to post, membership was required. Must he gain consent?
- Can a researcher use Amazon's Mturk (to complete research related tasks, e.g., survey responses) without IRB oversight?
- Is aggregated facebook data really anonymous?





# Internet Research Ethics: Challenges

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## Anonymity/ Confidentiality

- The distinction between **anonymous** and **confidential**
- “Our first duty as researchers is to honor the promise of **confidentiality**” (Easter, Davis, & Henderson, 2004)
- Is there a **truly secure online interaction**? What type of Internet **location/medium** is the **safest**? Is **encryption** enough?
- **Can one be anonymous online**? One may have a “different” identity, but that is still “me”



# Internet Research Ethics: Challenges

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## Revealing Identities

- How should online participants be **identified** in research reports given the **traceability** of online data?
- Screen **names**, pseudonyms (pen/assumed name) of screen names?
- Allow **participants** to make this **decision**?  
Part of informed consent?



*"On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog."*

# Internet Research Ethics: Challenges

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## Public & Private Spaces

- Are online forums, social networks considered *by members* to be a **public space** or a **private space**?
- What **expectations of privacy** exist? What sort of methods are being used?
- What **role** does the **researcher** play in the space? (Observer, participant, member?)
- What is the **content of the data**? (Sensitive/non-sensitive?) e.g., Medical information



# Internet Research Ethics: Challenges

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## Respect for Persons/Autonomy

- Practical challenges in obtaining **informed consent**:
  - No direct researcher – subject interaction
  - Often not feasible to obtain signed consent
  - Fluidity, changes in group membership, hard to verify understanding (the cornerstone of informed consent)
- Use of archived **quotes/data** never intended to be represented in research?

# Internet Research Ethics: Challenges

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## Ownership of Data

- **Offline** => The researcher conducts an observation, writes field notes, returns a report to the participant when completed- Owns “it”
- **Online** =>
  - A researcher conducts an observation of some online interactions on FB, a log/transcript is generated. Researcher has a copy. So do the participants. So does the server/administrator of the news group. Who owns “it?”
  - How long does e-data last? (“I will destroy the data in 5 years...” may mean nothing in an online context where researchers are not in control)
  - Cloud computing



# Internet Research Ethics: Challenges

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## **Sensitive material / Personal questions**

- In an online survey/experiment, you may offend people/evoke unpleasant thoughts or memories
  - Warn subjects at the beginning of the experiment
  - Remind subjects that responding is optional
  - Add 'Adults only', get people to enter their age and skip sensitive questions if under 18
  - Be sensitive in wording of questions + implications of particular ways of framing information
  - Offer contact details for further information

# Internet Research Ethics: Challenges

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## Feedback risks making a participant feel stupid

- E.g, Manipulation checks?
- Always a sensitive issue, difficult online, because **debrief** is harder
- Need to reassure participants that they are not being mocked/exploited when experimenter is not present
- **Debrief** =>
  - Explain the goal of the experiment in simple terms
  - Thank the participant for their time
  - Give them an email address to contact you if they want further information



# Internet Research Ethics: Challenges

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## Where can we find some answers?

- To learn more about these and other pressing questions and current challenges-



## INTERNET RESEARCH ETHICS

Digital Library, Resource Center, and Commons

HOME

MISSION

DIGITAL LIBRARY

COMMONS

BLOG

PROJECT TEAM

CONTACT



### IRE Project Members to Present at SACHRP

IRE Commons Director Elizabeth Buchanan and Team Member Michael Zimmer will present to the Secretary's Advisory Committee to the Office of Human Research Protections (SACHRP) on July 21, 2010. Elizabeth and Michael will join Montana Miller, Bowling Green University and John Palfrey, Harvard University, to discuss Internet research ethics and...

[Read More..](#)

### What is IRE?

Internet Research Ethics (IRE) is an emerging cross-disciplinary field which studies how research is conducted in online environments and seeks to resolve the subsequent ethical dilemmas in normative and practical terms. While similar to its physical counterpart, conducting scholarly research online is different in terms of ethics and values. For example, online surveys bring new privacy concerns. Research in chat rooms confound our notions of subject anonymity and identifiability. Scraping data from social networks or public blogs complicate issues of informed consent.



LEARN MORE

Have a **question?** Want to **learn more?**  
visit the

INTERNET RESEARCH ETHICS  
**COMMONS**

# The Term Paper

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- A written assignment, based on:
  - Their online surveys/questionnaires that were developed and carried out this semester (methodological paper), OR
  - Students may submit a **short research paper** based on **data that originate in one of the indices** discussed in the course (research paper)
- **Papers will be submitted in couples**
- **Submission Deadline** => January 3rd, 2022 at 12:00 CET via the IS



# The Term Paper

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- **Methodological Papers** => Focused on your work process, not findings. What was your goal when developing your survey/questionnaire? who was the target audience? what information did you take into consideration when designing the survey (based on the target audience + the academic literature about online surveys)? what was your recruiting process? how many people completed the survey (demographics, etc.)? what are the preliminary outcomes? what would be the answer to the initial research question/goal, based on this data?
- **Research Papers** => Papers should include a research question, summarized literature review, info about the internet-based data used to answer the research question, an analysis of the data (answering the research question), and a conclusion

# The Term Paper

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- Papers should include a title page (word count, names of the authors, etc.) and a reference list
- Citation (in-text and in the reference list) should follow APA style
- At least 5 academic sources must be used
- Word count: 2,000-2,500. Format: pdf, 12 points, Times New Roman font, 1.5 spaced, justified, page numbering.
  - The word count includes footnotes but excludes references



**Thank You For Your Interest in the  
Course!**