
The internet is not only a technology but an engine of social change.
—Steve Jones, “Studying the Net,” 1999

INTRODUCTION

Research Ethics and the Internet

Over the past decade, the work of garnering data from cyberspace has been moving onto new research ground, reaching beyond the mainstream of methodological practice. The Internet both presents new opportunities of inquiry and provides for a great expansion of traditional techniques of investigation — and thus, not surprisingly, researchers are increasingly discovering its enormous wealth of available data. Denzin (2004: 1) observes that online research moulds traditional qualitative research methods to the Internet environment, and encompasses spaces such as e-mail, chat rooms, web pages, Listservs, some forms of instant messaging, MUDs, MOOs, Usenet newsgroups (NGs), audio, and audio and video exchanges.¹

Computer technology is, then, increasingly expanding human communication and communicative possibilities, proffering new techniques of conducting research. Indeed, says Lyman (1996: 40), “We are in the midst of a historical change, perhaps a renaissance in which new forms of knowledge and new arts have been made possible by technology.” As Schwimmer (1996: 566) observes, the “creation and expansion of Internet communication services” allow

for ethnographic presentations expanded and embellished by inclusion of visual images, case studies, complementary texts, and field notes. It also opens the possibility for new forms of expression that can better capture the multilevel referencing and interrelatedness of complex symbolic and behavioral systems. Accordingly, post-modernists might more easily realize their objectives of articulating numerous voices and perspectives without the restraints of linear exposition.

For Nunes (1995: 314), the “Internet, both as a technological artefact and as a popular image, provides a site for exploring ‘the world’... in postmodernity.” In large part, as a form of popular culture, the Internet and, more expressly, its computer-mediated communication provide an avenue for users to express themselves freely (sometimes too freely perhaps) in a global forum. Clearly, the research potential of cyberspace presents researchers with a range of

possibilities and problematics, and at the same time it raises new questions of ethics — questions that researchers, research ethicists, and policy-makers alike will need to address.

While the practice of Internet research is being increasingly embraced, and despite its enormous potential, few research practice conventions have been established for Internet research, thus leaving the critical researcher confronted by quandaries at most every point in the research process: “Email interviews, real-time focus groups or online ‘observation’ all present dilemmas with which the online researcher must grapple” (Mann and Stewart 2000: 47). In large part, the ethics gap is due to “cultural lag” (Ogburn 1966). The non-material culture of online research has yet to change as fast as the material culture of computer technology and the Internet.

Issues around formalized ethical regulations addressing Internet research are now drawing the attention of scholars around the world, most notably in the United States and Great Britain; and, indeed, heated discussions have ensued. In Canada specifically there remains little discussion or debate around the ethics of using data generated through the Internet for research purposes. In Canada human subject research is now ostensibly governed by the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (also known by its acronym, TCPS). Since its founding in 1994, the Tri-Council Working Group, consisting of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC), and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), has established the ethical guidelines upon which all learned research with human subjects is to be undertaken under the auspices of post-secondary institutions (Canadian Institutes 1998). The TCPS positions itself as “addressing the paramount need for the highest ethical standards” (Canadian Institutes 1998: i.1). To ensure that this goal is reached, its mandated ethical guidelines are policed by local research ethics boards (REBs) installed within the post-secondary and other research institutions across Canada. The United States has a similar structure, with its institutional review boards (IRBs), which are mandated to protect human subjects involved in learned research (Johns, Hall, and Crowell 2004: 107).

Yet oddly enough the TCPS has remained largely silent on the role and practice of research conducted through the Internet. A close reading of the TCPS reveals, for instance, that researchers who collect cyberdata through non-obtrusive means are exempt from REB review, on the contention that in such cases there is no *human subject* involved. This book, then, aims to decipher the ethics of conducting research as mandated by the TCPS — and in particular to examine how those ethics apply in the areas of social sciences, humanities, and communications (among other fields) when it comes to Internet research, or how they may be interpreted by researchers who use

the Internet as a research tool. I say “decipher” because as it now stands the TCPS does not explicitly recognize or address the increasing trend of employing information technologies (ITs) data for research purposes.

In this book I examine some of the debates that surround Internet research, explore possibilities for research as they may be extrapolated from the Canadian policy document, and develop a guide for conducting research through the Internet insofar as we may draw upon the present TCPS to conduct research through the Internet. This book speaks to researchers who want to understand the mechanics of Internet research as those mechanics are regulated — or not regulated — through the TCPS. Finally, the book explores the notion of “human subject” and the implicit assumptions that underlie the TCPS as they relate to and respond to the protection of human subjects. Of the many questions I explore in the book, I ask whether specific researcher inquiries are exempt from REB review and approval on the grounds that the use of data proffered by the Internet, in many cases, does not increase risk to the “cyberdenizen” — and that, in many cases, researchers are analyzing text rather than working with human subjects.

Harvesting research materials from cyberspace is, moreover, viable, legal, and attractive as an expeditious way of collecting rich data (Sharf 1999).² The attractiveness of such data may be enhanced by the prospect that no formal ethical review is required to pursue some forms of Internet research, given that there is no human subject involved in cases where only text is accessed through public Internet spaces. In other words, researchers who non-intrusively harvest publicly available web-based materials need not seek REB approval to commence their research.

Since its launching in 1998, the TCPS has been revised three times (in 2000, 2002, and 2005).³ In May 2000 the Tri-Council statement made a change in the appeals process, with a new provision allowing for the option of small universities to explore possibilities for regional co-operation or alliances in sharing appeals boards. The Working Group also fashioned a change regarding the authority of the REB, with an amendment asserting, “Each institution is accountable for research carried out in its own jurisdiction or under its auspices.” In addition it made some grammar corrections in the French version of the document.

In September 2002 the Tri-Council made a few minor changes in language, plus an addition to article 3.6 that speaks to privacy and confidentiality related to data linkage, and the merging of databases. In October 2005 the organization corrected typographical errors and made editorial and technical corrections with respect to institutional names, contact information, and the TCPS citation form. It also released an updated policy document along with these amendments.

Since 2003, with the creation of the Social Sciences and Humanities

Research Ethics Special Working Committee (SSHWC), the Interagency Advisory Panel on Research Ethics (PRE) has been considering further amendments, especially in examining the TCPS as it specifically relates to research in the humanities and social sciences. In December 2006 SSHWC issued a report that assessed questions of qualitative research as problematics inherent to the current TCPS.

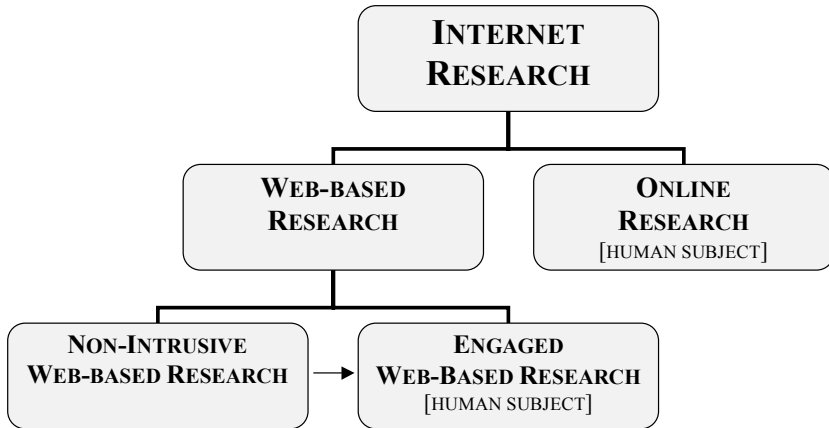
In addressing these issues here, for purposes of simplicity I use the language of the TCPS. Although debates have surfaced around the TCPS's absorption and championing of scientific epistemological principles and methodological terminology, I refrain from fully criticizing these points. For the time being I will leave these debates to others, because challenging the language and the inherent positivist bias of the TCPS is not the purpose of this book.⁴ Rather, the book speaks specifically to ethical *practices* as extrapolated from the TCPS as it now stands, and as they may help to guide researchers who conduct, or who want to conduct, investigations with the aid of the Internet. Suffice it to say that I do not agree that the language of "research subject" is a useful one for many social researchers; I find the terms "participant" or "respondent" more appealing. Indeed, from the beginning, analysts involved in the genesis of the TCPS struggled with the language employed by the document. The TCPS (Canadian Institutes 1998: i.3) states clearly that in its preparation there was "extensive discussion" around whether to use the language of "subject" or "participant." Ultimately, it was concluded by a majority vote that the language of "research subject" would be used because "it is they who bear the risks of research." Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind that of the three funding councils, SSHRC would be most likely to entertain qualitative research proposals that would approach research with a more participatory view.

Moving Towards a Typology of Internet Research

Research conducted through the Internet, with the aid of new information technologies (ITs) tends to employ a variety of terms that encompass disparate approaches to or aspects of the work. Thus, I find it useful to differentiate and provide separate definitions for several terms that appear throughout the published literature that examines ethics related to Internet research.

I use the term *web-based research* to refer generally to methods that *capture* data — for the purpose of analysis — through web sources such as Internet sites, online discussion groups, news servers, search engines, and blogs. Web-based research can be practised very easily with newsgroups (NGs) or other discussion forums that cultivate what is known as *computer-mediated communication* (CMC). According to Tidwell and Walther (2002: 319), CMC offers a "text-based" venue that can be used to conduct research, which in itself also raises new questions as an important research tool. Markham (2004)

Figure 1



found, for example, that she was struck by the numerous spelling mistakes that a subject made in his communications with her. She questioned whether her view of the subject was coloured by these spelling mistakes and, if so, queried whether that colouring interfered with her analysis of the respondent specifically and the communications more generally. Not unlike more traditional approaches, such as interviews and subject-responded surveys, researchers frequently struggle with the “ahhs” and the “errs” contained in subjects’ speech patterns. Although the Internet offers a new venue in and through which research can be conducted, Markham’s questions are not new; questions related to speech nuances and the reporting of them have been an ongoing research dilemma, especially for qualitative researchers. That CMC illuminates such nuances and thus enhances interrogation of this important research question serves ultimately to move analyses of the matter further.

Some writers see the Internet as a consumable site (Christians and Chen 2004: 15), and one that is now being embraced, or consumed, by many researchers in the social sciences, humanities, and communications. Given the enormous potential and increasing scope of research interest proffered by CMC, as far back as 1995 Blackwell Publishing introduced its periodical *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*. In 1999 Garton, Haythornthwaite, and Wellman noted that, in large part, research conducted with CMC tends to look at how individuals interfaced with their computers, and how persons and small groups interacted online. Today the analytical potentialities of CMC have expanded greatly. As Denzin (1999: 108) observes, “speaker-writers”⁵ offer “cybernarratives” that “are grounded in the everyday lives and biographies of the women and men who write them.” According to Denzin (1999: 108), life within CMC “involves struggles over identity, meaning, and the self.” CMC thus holds enormous potential for social scientists (and oth-

ers) who have an interest in understanding the ways in which humans create and negotiate meaning, and the ways in which those negotiations give rise to constructions of reality.

Non-intrusive and Engaged Web-based Research

One useful strategy for establishing a formal policy on the use of Internet material lies in the extent of researcher imposition on cyber-inhabitants. Eysenbach and Till (2001: 1103) distinguish three general types of research methods available through the Internet: (1) passive analysis, such as studies of information patterns on websites or in discussion groups, in which researchers do not involve themselves; (2) active analysis, in which researchers participate in communications to clarify or determine the accuracy of information; and (3) when researchers identify themselves and gather information in the form of online semi-structured interviews, online focus groups, online surveys, or use the Internet to recruit subjects for traditional research. These writers offer a useful organization by which we can differentiate various approaches to conducting Internet research. Their framework, however, can be pushed further by clarifying terms and isolating the approaches more discretely. What Eysenbach and Till refer to as “passive analysis” I call “non-intrusive web-based analysis,” and what they refer to as “active” I call “engaged web-based research.” I prefer to organize approaches to Internet research as non-intrusive or engaged, rather than as passive, because the term “passive” implies that the research is devoid of intentional, or deliberate, and conscientious analysis.⁶

Web-based research, then, can envelope either non-intrusive analyses, or engaged analyses. Non-intrusive analyses refer to techniques of data collection that do not interrupt the naturally occurring state of the site or cybercommunity, or interfere with premanufactured text. Conversely, engaged analyses reach into the site or community and thus engage the participants of the web source. On one level, participants may be engaged only insofar as their existing comments or participation on a site are interrogated by the researcher. That is, a researcher does not interfere with the original generation of data, but instead investigates contextual questions related to premanufactured text. A researcher who plays a role in the generation of data moves into engaged web-based research or online research. At a further level, a researcher can engineer the creation of data.

The third category introduced by Eysenbach and Till involves researchers identifying themselves to a group for the specific purpose of recruiting research subjects. I refer to this as “online research” — and the term covers methodological practices that begin with a traditional research design but move the research into cyberspace to find suitable samples or to facilitate a research enterprise. With this approach, a researcher intentionally sets out

to identify and harness a particular population online. The online research methods can include participatory observational ethnographics, focus groups, interviews, surveys, experimental research, breaching experiments, and action research (also sometimes named participatory research, collaborative inquiry, emancipatory research, or action learning), whereby several persons identify a particular problem and then together seek a resolution.

In many cases, cyberspace provides sample populations that are difficult to capture through traditional sampling means (see Gosling et al. 2004). For example, someone living in a small town and trying to conduct research on a particular fetish would probably find it quite difficult to obtain a suitable sample in that locale; whereas cyberspace, as a global community, offers a plethora of otherwise difficult to locate samples or audiences, found, for instance, on NG discussion sites, blogs, and/or other online discussion boards.

I use the term *Internet research* more generically to include both web-based research and online research — to encompass all research that is conducted with the aid of cyberspace. Still, while I personally assign specific definitions to the various forms of research conducted with ITs, when I reference the work of other authors I draw on their language of web-based, online, and Internet research rather than risk complicating or misrepresenting their texts.

I use the term *denizens of cyberspace*, or *cyber-denizens*, to refer to persons involved in the complex communities and cultures made available and established through the Internet. Whether denizens of cyberspace are constituted as human subjects will depend upon whether their premanufactured texts are captured for data analysis or whether they are actively engaged by researchers. In both cases, these denizens frequent the cyberworld as rightful citizens, moulding and shaping the cyberworld as they weave rich tapestries of context, communities, and cultures.

Finally, throughout the book I use the terms “funding councils,” “councils,” and “TCPS” interchangeably. CIHR, NSERC, and SSHRC represent Canada’s three primary funding sources of learned research. The professional research ethics of these three organizations/councils gave rise to the creation of the TCPS. Research funding is contingent upon compliance with the TCPS: “These Agencies will consider funding (or continued funding) only to individuals and institutions that certify that they comply with [the TCPS] regarding research involving human subjects” (Canadian Institutes 1998: i.1).

As Costigan (1999: xviii–xix) points out, “Research on the Internet generally divides into two main categories.” The first category represents the ability to search and retrieve data; and the second involves interactive communication capabilities, such as those offered by public chat rooms, NGs,

or other discussion boards. To the first category we can align web-based research — which involves methods of investigation that move non-intrusively through public Internet spaces. Data are captured in large part through search engines or hyperlinks. Essentially, the researcher is invisible and poses no presence within the online site. The second category of interactive communication capabilities can also be aligned with web-based research, but the capabilities can be either non-intrusive or engaged. Importantly, interactive communication may be analyzed from afar, or may involve the presence of the researcher. Whether or not these forms of Internet research necessarily require formal REB approval is a question that I examine throughout this book.

Importantly, each of the categories of web-based research and online research carries with it somewhat disparate assumptions of human subject — and as we shall see, just what constitutes a human subject is highly debatable. If we take a close look at the TCPS, we can see that the policy document does indeed contain many guidelines that can easily be extrapolated to escort Internet researchers, and I believe that with a proper understanding of the TCPS we will be able to draw out the appropriate policies as they can be applied to Internet research. As Jones (1999a: xii) succinctly states, “The Internet matters.” Indeed, it is imperative that Canadian researchers develop an understanding of research ethics and the Internet, especially as those ethics are mandated through the TCPS; and that we consider what changes are needed to aid researchers who conduct data collection and analyses through cyberspace — with the aim of establishing specific guidelines by which researchers may proceed with that research.

Notes

1. In computer gaming, a MUD (Multi-User Dungeon or Domain or Dimension) is a multiplayer computer game that combines elements of role-playing games, hack and slash style computer games and social instant messaging chat rooms. Typically running on a bulletin board system or Internet server, the game is usually text driven, where players read descriptions of rooms, objects, events, other characters, and computer-controlled creatures or non-player characters (NPCs) in a virtual world. Players usually interact with each other and the surroundings by typing commands that resemble a natural language, usually English.

Traditional MUDs implement a fantasy world populated by elves, goblins, dwarves, halflings and other mythical or fantasy-based races, with players being able to take on any number of classes, including warriors, mages, priests, thieves, druids, etc., in order to gain specific skills or powers. The object of the game is to slay monsters, explore a rich fantasy world, to complete quests, go on adventures, create a story by role-playing, and/or advance the created character. Many MUDs were fashioned around the dice rolling rules of the *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D) series of games.

MUDs often have a fantasy setting, while many others are set in a science fiction-based universe or themed on popular books, movies, animations, history, etc. Still others, especially those which are often referred to as MOOs, are used in distance education or to allow for virtual conferences. MUDs have also attracted the interest of academic scholars from many fields, including communications, sociology, law, and synthetic economies.

Most MUDs are run as hobbies and are free to players; some may accept donations or allow players to “purchase” in-game items. There are also many professionally developed MUDs which charge a monthly subscription fee. (*Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MUD>>).

MOO (*MUD object oriented*) is a type of MUD and is a text-based online virtual reality system to which multiple users are connected at the same time.

The term MOO is used in two distinct, but related, senses. One is to refer to those programs descended from the original MOO server, and the other is to refer to any MUD that uses object oriented techniques to organize its database of objects, particularly if it does so in a similar fashion to the original MOO or its derivatives....

One of the most distinguishing features of a MOO is that its users can perform object oriented programming within the server, ultimately expanding and changing how the server behaves to everyone. Examples of such changes include authoring new rooms and objects, creating new generic objects for others to use, and changing the way the MOO interface operates (*Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*, <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MOO>>).

2. “Harvesting” is a term used for the collection of materials drawn from computer mediated interactions, usually collected without prior consent (see also Williams and Robson 2004: 27). This approach to data collection is also sometimes referred to as “mining.”
3. Throughout this book I rely on the 2005 policy document for citation purposes, unless my discussion specifically addresses one of the earlier amendments.
4. Some of these biases are captured by sshwc’s recent report, “Qualitative Research in the Context of the tcps” (Government of Canada 2006b).
5. “Speaker-writers,” according to Denzin (1999) are persons who offer their life stories as personal narratives or cultural texts in a printed form.
6. I would like to thank Deborah Poff for drawing my attention to this point.