

# Internet dreams: ethical challenges researching digital technologies

Adolfo Estalella

Universitat Oberta de Catalunya  
jestalellaf@uoc.edu // <http://www.estalella.eu>

## **Fieldwork among bloggers**

I will start outlining a few aspects of my doctoral research in order to introduce the topic of today.

I have been doing fieldwork for 18 months among blog and bloggers. For those of you who are not used to anthropology, fieldwork is the main technique of anthropologists. It consists of trying to live in the same way and experience the same things that the people you are researching. Participating in the world of those people that you are trying to understand is the source of anthropological knowledge.

The people I have been researching are intensive bloggers.

In my fieldwork, there are three main contexts in which I have produced data. First, on the bloggers events I have attended: workshops, conferences, informal meetings, etc. Second, on interviews with bloggers. And third, on the Internet.

On the Internet I have found an enormous amount of data from the bloggers I have been researching: articles published for years, images, videos, bookmarks... all of them are easily accessible.

The question I asked myself then and now is:

Can I collect all this data?

Should I ask for consent?

Would this people be upset if I collect and use this data?

## **Can I do that?**

This is the kind of questions research ethics pose. Can I do that? Do I have consent for doing it? Could it damage or affect people?

One of the main aspects of research ethics deals with our responsibility for the people who take part in our researches.

What I am going to do today is first introduce some basis of research ethics. Then I will discuss the particular problems that the Internet poses for researchers, specifically how the dualism between private and public has shaped ethical decisions on Internet research for

many times. However, this dualism is highly controversial, so I will conclude discussing two alternative approaches to guide the 'what' values (what values should we respect?) and the how (how should we respect them?).

My aim today is not to propose solutions, but propose some elements to question our research practices.

Researchers started to ask "can I do that?" in the fifties, after the Second World War. There is no need to remember some of the implications of scientist in the war: Manhattan project, nazi experiments on concentrations camps, for instance). Well, it was not a completely new question, but the effort who was devoted and the institutional way in which it was posed was completely new. It was in the biomedical sciences where this debate started. They started to think that they were dealing with human subjects when they were researching and so they had some responsibility for them. Some years later social scientists started opened a similar reflection.

As a result of this debates, different disciplines developed ethical guidelines that are recommendations for researchers. They are not problem solving guides but instruments that reflect on the responsibility that researchers have with the people they are researching.

### **Ethical guidelines**

I quote some statement of a few guidelines:

Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association:

Anthropological researchers must do everything in their power to ensure that their research does not harm the safety, dignity, or privacy of the people with whom they work, conduct research, or perform other professional activities

ACM Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct

1. GENERAL MORAL IMPERATIVES.
  - 1.1 Contribute to society and human well-being.
  - 1.2 Avoid harm to others.
  - 1.3 Be honest and trustworthy.
- ...

Along the years this concern has been institutionalized. There are important differences between the Anglo-Saxon world and the rest.

In the USA, the Institutional Review Boards review research project and decide whether they comply with ethical codes. If you don't get the approval of the IRB you can have serious problems for publishing, getting public funding, etc.

In the last years, there have been intense debates on IRB. Many researchers have criticized IRB arguing that they are more worried about protecting their institutions, from possible lawsuits, than about protecting research subjects.

In contrast with the Anglo-Saxon world, in Europe it is the individual researcher –I refer to social scientist- who has to decide upon these issues. So, it is important to maintain a

permanent debate in the academia, because there is not any institution or any formal procedure supervising our work –at least for now.

### **The Internet singularity**

Now, I come back to the Internet.

It is a technology that is everyday more imbricate in people's life. People chat on the Internet, publish their photos, tell their dreams, listen to the music they like... all this actions leave permanent material traces, traces of social interactions that are easy to locate, access and collect.

The Internet is a dream come truth for social scientists. Isn't it? Because you can easily access all this social data.

However, collecting these information pose researchers particular situations and problems that are not easy to decide based on the conventional ethical guidelines and experiences. The Internet dream comes to be an ethical nightmare for many researchers.

This is the reason why ten years ago Internet researchers started to elaborate new guidelines, focused specifically on the Internet. The Association of Internet Researchers, the American Association for the Advanced of Science proposed their guidelines, in Germany too.

### **The private/public dualism**

Debates on ethical research on the Internet have been established around a main value: privacy.

The public/private dualism has been the basis for articulating ethical decisions on Internet research for the last years.

General ethical codes establish that if some data is public then you don't need to ask for consent, if it is private you have to ask for it.

Inform consent involves explaining people the research you are going to do and ask them if they want to participate.

Think for instance in a street, a tv program or a newspaper. Researchers don't have to ask for consent for collecting this data and analyzing it.

However, researchers have to ask for consent if they want to use private communications such as a phone conversation or a letter. Usually, if we don't ask for consent it is impossible to access all this data.

When we translate this dual way of thinking to the Internet, the situation gets complicated. First because it is very easy to access any data, and second because it is not clear whether it is public or private.

Think in a particular forum, chat or blog. Are they public or private? This is the first questions researchers faced on the Internet.

When you ask some people in a forum or a newsgroup freely accessible (without password), for instance, if they feel comfortable with researchers using the information they publish, many of them deny the right of researchers to use this information.

They have some expectations of privacy.

The question of defining whether something on the Internet is public or private is highly controversial; so problematic that many researchers have started to invent new concepts like semi-public (and semi-private) or privacy in public.

### **More than the public/private dualism**

Taking into account all these problems, some researchers have started to think in different terms.

I have started proposing two questions, one about the 'what values': what values should we respect? And a second about 'the how': how should we respect these values?

I am going to discuss the 'what' and then the 'how'.

Maria Bakardjieva (University of Calgary) and Andrew Feenberg (San Diego State University) have proposed two concepts in order to offer an alternative decision framework different to the one based on the distinction between private and public. One is objectification and the other one is alienation. The first refers to how people construct their identity on the Internet, they objectify their identity in material traces: text, images, videos, etc. The other refers to the appropriation of these digital objects for purposes never intended by their authors. For instance, for research purposes.

Instead of thinking in terms of public and private, we can think in terms of alienation. Was it in people's mind that this information could be used for research purposes?

I don't mean that all ethical decision on Internet research should be guided by this concept, what I want to point out is that it offers the opportunity to formulate questions in a new way.

### **Common values, controversial facts**

The second issue is the how. How should we respect these values? How do we translate a proposal of this kind into practice?

And I want to discuss a proposal of Christina Allen that touches a real hard issue; she calls it dialogical ethics.

It seems pretty clear that almost no one researcher will discuss the obligation to protect research subjects' safety, dignity and privacy. The thorny issue comes when we have to perform these values in practice, when we have to decide whether something is private or public, dangerous for subjects or inoffensive.

The point I want to stress is that ethical issues are, most of the time, not about values but about facts, about establishing facts. Debates are not about abstract values: 'privacy' or 'safe', but about establishing concrete facts. Debates arise upon a particular technology or communication space that has to be defined as private (or public) or safe (or unsafe).

Well, the point now is: if we agree about values, but we disagree about facts, then, who decide upon facts? Who establish the facts? Who decide that a particular fact is public or private, safe or unsafe?

I want to refer again to the example I have discussed before, in which participants in a forum or a newsgroup and researchers don't agree in the definition of the communication space: public, private or something else.

The question is: who has the right to decide?

### **A field blog blog a dialogical ethics**

The answer of Christina Allen is that we should debate these issues with the people involved in the research. It is not our right to decide but we should ask or learn from the people involved. We should dialogue eith them.

I want to come back to my fieldwork. One of the key strategists of my fieldwork was elaborating a blog. There were three reasons for it. First, the blog was aimed at establishing and sustaining relations with bloggers. Second, blogging was a way to experience by myself what it means being a blogger. And third, and this is the point for today, the blog was aimed at informing and articulating my ethical decisions in the field.

I had done a previous ethnography in a very similar context and drawing on this experience I tried to get ahead on similar problems.

The blog has allowed me to understand how bloggers conceived their privacy, or better, how many bloggers have given up to their privacy. Moreover, the blog has been a permanent open door to discuss my role in the field, a way to open possibilities for letting bloggers to reach me, to question me during my fieldwork. It has been a way to expose myself in the same way they expose themselves.

This is the basis for a dialogical ethics. The important issue is to articulate means for opening this dialogue. Register in the forum you want to research. Opening a blog to discuss the research you are doing, building a website explaining the research... that way we can inform people, we can obtain opinions and discuss with them; and even correct some of our approaches.

This is the point: we should look for ways to dialogue with our research subjects, because only discussing with them the facts, we can perform the values we try to respect.

