

Internet Research

The Protection of Human Research Subjects

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Introduction

- The Internet, with an estimated 500 million users worldwide, has much to offer researchers, both as a research tool & the object of study
- It allows researchers to conduct survey research without the expense associated with mailed surveys



Introduction (cont'd)

- It facilitates the process of recruiting groups of subjects with characteristics or experiences often not found in local communities
- It provides a way to pre-screen participants
- It provides a huge pool of potential subjects



Introduction (cont'd)

- It provides the opportunity to observe communications among individuals & to code & analyze an expansive range of phenomena, such as the use of online support groups or the decision-making behaviors of online consumers
- The Internet itself may be a subject of study, including linguistic & discourse-based analysis of computer-mediated communication & the Internet as a cultural entity



Observing Online Communications

- One of the most controversial issues regarding Internet research involves the observation of online communications
- Part of the attraction of the Internet is that researchers can get verbatim transcripts of interactions without announcing their presence
- One view is that the act of posting to an open site, accessible to millions, constitutes public behavior & may be observed & recorded without consent
- If no identifiers are recorded, such observations may not even meet the definition of research with human subjects



Observing Online Communications (cont'd)

- An opposing view is that, people participating in some of these groups make certain assumptions about privacy, and that investigators should honor those assumptions
- If one subscribes to this second view, either consent would be required or it would have to be waived in accordance with the regulations



Designing Internet Research: The Consent Process

- The principle of respect for persons requires researchers to give prospective participants adequate information for making the decision to participate in a study



Designing Internet Research: The Consent Process

- Ensuring comprehension
- Documenting consent
- Allowing withdrawal from a study
- Identifying underage participants
- Using deception

Ensuring Comprehension:

Methods of Ensuring Comprehension Include:

- Incorporating short questionnaires within the consent process to assess the potential subject's understanding of the information presented in the online consent document
- Asking subjects to contact the researcher to discuss the information presented before beginning the study
- Designing interactive consent processes that are tailored to potential subjects



Designing Internet Research: Privacy Issues

- Observing internet communications
- Being aware of identifiers



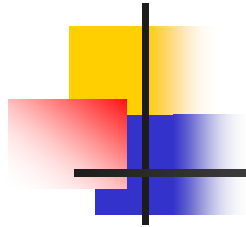
Assessing Risk

- Breach of confidentiality
- IP addresses
- Harm in the data collection process



Technical Issues

- Communication between the researcher and the subject
- Communication between the subject and the web server
- Communication between the web server and the researcher
- Protection of data



Links to Resources

- Ethical and Legal Aspects of Human Subjects Research in Cyberspace: a report from the AAAA Program on Scientific Freedom, Law and Responsibility in collaboration with NIH/OHRP