## **Guidelines for Online/Internet Research**

## Introduction

While the principles which govern the ethical conduct of research in Canada (TCPS2) apply to all research (including online/internet research), the purpose of the following document is to provide guidelines, suggestions and issues to consider regarding the planning and carrying out of online/internet research more specifically. This document is not intended to provide answers to all potential ethical issues that may arise when conducting research.

The use of the internet as a method for or as a source of data collection is becoming increasingly common among researchers. This new methodology presents several new challenges for researchers in their efforts to ensure conformity with the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS). For example, researchers must consider who the "participant" is in the research, do you need consent and if so, from whom (e.g., the person of interest or all "people" that individual interacts with on the internet), issues related to privacy and the expectation of privacy, the potential for identification or harm if avatars or other alter-egos are used, and other considerations.

The internet can be used for your research method (e.g. online questionnaire), recruitment (i.e. mailing list) or to obtain participants (e.g. chat rooms).

Some examples of internet communities or dimensions that can be studied or used as research tools include\*:

Discussion boards
 Online videos
 Pictures
 Mailing lists
 Blogs
 Notices
 Archives
 Chat rooms

NewsgroupsE-mailSocial network sitesOnline databases

- Online questionnaire/survey - Online interview(s) or focus group(s)

Note: Several terms can be used to describe the virtual world. The term internet is used in this document and is meant to include terminology such as cyberspace, online, World Wide Web, hyperspace, information highway, online network, the Net, the Web and virtual world.

<sup>\*</sup>this is not an exhaustive list

#### **Benefits**

## The Value of Internet Research:

Like the internet itself, internet research can be extremely valuable due to its easy accessibility, vast outreach into different communities and seemingly endless bounds of time and distance. Internet or online research can be time efficient for both researchers and participants, cost effective, and in some cases provide more comfort and convenience to participants. While there are many beneficial aspects of online/internet research, according to Gunther Eysenbach and James Till "such research raises new issues in research ethics, particularly concerning informed consent and privacy of research subjects, as the borders between public and private space are sometimes blurred" (2001: p.1103).

#### **Risks**

Major ethical issues that should be considered when conducting research or recruiting participants involving online/internet research include risk to *privacy and confidentiality*, ensuring *free and informed consent* and *decreasing social and psychological risks*.

According to the TCPS 2, observational approaches to research raise ethical concerns related to infringement of privacy. Researchers should pay close attention to context for which the observation is occurring, the location of the observation and whether or not there is researcher intervention/influence creating or influencing the behavior/activity being observed. Researchers must consider whether the participants being observed have an expectation of privacy and how the recording and reporting/publishing of the participants and/or participant data may impact on their privacy. Further ethical implications may arise (depending on the specific context of the research) if participant identities become known. In some instances, researchers should consider how permission to be identified will be obtained. (see Article 10.3, pg 142)

1. Privacy and confidentiality (Private vs. Public space/information)

It is important to note that internet community members do not always expect to be research subjects. According to the TCPS 2, while there are publicly accessible sites available, some sites have an expectation of privacy (e.g., internet chat rooms, self-help groups with restricted membership). It is the researchers' responsibility to consider privacy expectations of site participants. (see Articles 2.2, pg 18, and Article 10.3, pg 142)

In addition, researchers should consider the cultural implications and expectations of privacy. In some cultures, there may be a reasonable expectation of privacy for some activities. Researchers should consider how individuals involved in religious services or cultural practices, chat rooms on the internet, or observation of sacred ceremonies without approval from the appropriate individuals or groups (e.g., Elders or traditional knowledge holders in Aboriginal

research) may impact their expectations of privacy. Further, consideration should be given to how non-engagement of participants in the subsequent use or interpretation of data may result in unintended negative outcomes (see Articles 9.5, 9.6 and 9.8, pp 115-119).

- When assessing participants expectations for privacy/confidentiality, the researcher should ask themselves the following questions:
  - (a) Does the community or group require registration?
  - (b) Do you need permission to access the information?
  - (c) Do site regulations prohibit the use of its information?

\*If you answered yes to any of the above questions, privacy of the space/information is likely expected and should be further explored to determine expectations of site users and operators.

 It is also important for researchers to consider the individual context of the research:

Who are the target members of the group?
What are the group norms and codes?
What is the sense of privacy and security of participants?

- Internet/Online populations people tend to over disclose because they
  assume anonymity (technologically naïve) or internet community members
  may have released enough information to become identifiable.
   Researchers are encouraged to think about how these risks could be
  mitigated.
- Online survey tools A variety of free on-line survey software is available for research purposes. Researchers should consider where the data servers are housed and where there are some additional security issues concerning the use of these tools. Servers outside Canada are subject to the laws of the hosting country (e.g., the Patriot Act in the United States), and participants must be made aware of limitations regarding privacy in these instances.
- 2. Problems ensuring free and informed consent

Questions to consider:

- Who are your participants? Do you need consent from the person of interest in addition to others who they may "chat" with online?
- How will you ensure the information is understood and obtained voluntarily online?
- The protection of children: Is parental consent required? How do researchers ensure that parental consent is received? Is there a way to assess capacity online?
- How can participants ask questions if needed?

• If applicable, how will you debrief participants and report research results back to participants?

## Other issues to consider:

- Announcing the research may influence future communication patterns or provoke members to opt out (e.g., researchers may be perceived as intruders and may damage the communities they wish to study).
- Written vs. clickable consent it is difficult to obtain proof that the person read the contents and understands the consent form. To mitigate this, researchers could use check boxes at each stage of the consent form which may increase the likelihood of it being read.

When conducting observational research (including internet research), researchers must demonstrate to the REB that steps have been taken to address privacy and confidentiality issues, particularly in cases where consent is not sought. In cases where potential participants have a reasonable or limited expectation of privacy, and where consent is not sought, researchers are expected to provide, for consideration by the REB, a rationale and justification for the lack of consent.

However, it is also acknowledged by the REB that when individuals know they are being observed, it may influence natural behavior. Therefore, in some cases it may be appropriate to request clearance for covert observation studies. Examples of this type of research include studies where the researcher has no direct contact with the participants or observation of cueing behaviours in shopping malls. In other studies, an intervention by the researcher may be required (e.g., observing helping behavior of participants in an emergency room where the researchers stage an emergency). In these instances obtaining informed consent prior to the research may affect the validity of the research itself, and the researcher may ask for an exception to the general consent requirement.

(see Article 10.3, pp 141-142)

3. Decreasing social and psychological risks (Balancing Harms and Benefits)

#### Issues to consider:

- It is difficult to provide assistance in dealing with distress associated with the potential repercussions of internet research
- Monitoring participants is also difficult:
   What should the researcher do if they observe internet community
   members in distress?
- Providing counseling or other references can be an issue, particularly with international studies. How can supports be offered that are appropriate and geographically accessible?
- Sensitivity of data Is the information being studied/collected of an intimate or otherwise sensitive nature?

 Avatars can reflect race, stereotypes, biases, etc and may make an individual identifiable. If avatars are used by participants, can they be construed as offensive by others and thereby increase psychological or social harm to participants? Can the participant be identified by their avatar?

Considerations of the nature of the internet research, its aims and its potential to invade sensitive interests may help researchers improve the design and conduct of such research.

## **Exemption from REB review**

While some social networking sites and chat rooms are public, not all participants of these sites are seeking public visibility and may have the illusion that these spaces are indeed private.

According to the TCPS (2010), "REB review is not required for research involving the observation of people in public places where:

- (a) It does not involve any intervention staged by the researcher, or direct interaction with the individuals or groups;
- (b) Individuals or groups targeted for observation have no expectation of privacy; and
- (c) Any dissemination of research results does not allow identification of specific individuals" (TCPS2, Article 2.3; also see Article 10.2, pg 141).

Potential questions to consider when determining if your project is exempt:

- -Does your project involve having participants engage in conversations with others? If so, are these conversations "staged" by the researcher in anyway?
- -Does your project involve engagement in conversation by the researcher?
- -Does your project involve observation only? If so, do the participants expect privacy in their interactions with each other?
- -In any conversations with others by your participant, would that person be able to be identified?
- -Does the site or group have a charter that specifies expectations regarding research and membership privacy (e.g., is the site open to everyone or only to "members"; is research permitted?)

# **Key References**

- "Extending the spectrum: The TCPS and Ethical Issues in Internet Research" by SSHWC, February 2008
- "Ethical Issues in Qualitative Research on Internet Communities" by Gunther Eysenback and James E. Till. BMJ, 2001: 323: 1103-5
- Queen's University developed criteria for online exemption <a href="http://www.queensu.ca/ors/researchethics/GeneralREB/PoliciesandProcedures/digitaldatapolicy.pdf">http://www.queensu.ca/ors/researchethics/GeneralREB/PoliciesandProcedures/digitaldatapolicy.pdf</a>
- Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (2010)