A grey area of research ethics: Public vs private spaces for internet-based research

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Abstract

Internet-based researchers (IBR) are often presented with the challenge of determining what is in the public and private domain for online ethics. Convery and Cox (2012) argue that the literature generally supports the use of informed consent in private settings but is less clear about public spaces. Thus, establishing what is public and private is increasingly relevant. The complexity in this area is that ethical guidelines vary from university to university. What is acceptable or deemed as public in one institute may be deemed up for interpretation in another.

Perspective

Internet-based researchers (IBR) are often presented with the challenge of determining what is in the public and private domain for online ethics. Convery and Cox (2012) argue that the literature generally supports the use of informed consent in private settings but is less clear about public spaces. Thus, establishing what is public and private is increasingly relevant. The complexity in this area is that ethical guidelines vary from university to university. What is acceptable or deemed as public in one institute may be deemed up for interpretation in another. For example, the University of Sunderland (2022) describes it as a 'grey area' and that this type of research 'stretches the definition of what it actually means to be a human participant in research'. Whereas Teesside University's Ethics Policy (2023, p.35) states that online forums and internet activity are subject to the same ethical considerations as any other form of research as 'it cannot be presume that activity online is public and open for use as research data'.

In face-to-face research, the concept of research consisting of a 'human participant' is much clearer. For example, observing crowd activities at a football match is considered ethically acceptable. In contrast, the boundaries of observing comments and behaviour on a live forum are less distinct. Eysenbach and Till (2001) propose that to determine whether informed consent is required, it is first necessary to decide whether communication is private or public.

Researchers may view whether data is public or private based on chronology. If posts on a forum or social networking site have been publicly accessible for years, a researcher may deem this to be public. However, the difficulty with this interpretation is that participants may not be accessible as they may not have access to the site or have different contact details. Convery and Cox (2012) argue that this could lead to historic social media posts such as tweets being viewed in the same way as a newspaper archive, with postings the equivalent of letters and correspondence, which are typically viewed as legitimate sources of data by social historians.

Whilst the archiving of internet data is particularly interesting, I argue that newspaper articles were originally written for the public space and with public visibility in mind. Whereas individuals participating in a Twitter

debate or Facebook post may have viewed their communications as private, regardless if the content could be accessible to anyone. Estalella and Ardevol (2011) found that participants viewed the use of their blogs or forum discussion comments for research without their consent was an infringement of their privacy. Failure to seek consent or to disclose oneself as a researcher who collects data online, such as social media posts, risks violating the participants' sense of privacy and security.

Interestingly, Watson et al. (2007) argues that regardless if the participant's view or expect their online messages to be private, they are 'fair game' for research purposes, and participants are generally misguided in this area. In other words, it is irrelevant that individuals may not be aware that their messages are being analysed in research, as the general population have a misconception about what private actually means,

This concept links into some of my previous research on social media in education, digital literacy, and logical reasoning (i.e., knowing if one of your posts is inappropriate). One argument levied at the social media age ban is that children may not know that their social media comments and activity are permanent (Williams 2022).

Conversely, Hudson and Brook (2005) argue that it is the researcher's responsibility to protect participants' expectations of privacy and that they should expect 'reasonable expectations of privacy'. This is perhaps the most pragmatic approach whereby privacy is loosely defined and very much depends on a particular group.

I contend that researchers ought to view non-intrusive research, such as viewing social media posts and forum messages similar to eavesdropping on a conversation in a coffee shop. Whilst this is a public space, there is a low risk of their conversation being recorded, thus using their data without informed consent is unethical. In other words, online data ought to be viewed as being along a continuum from very private and potentially sensitive to public and non-sensitive (Barnes 2004; 2006). However, I acknowledge that obtaining informed consent whilst investigating chat rooms is impractical. To overcome some of these challenges, a researcher may contact the site administrator, or post information asking for volunteers for the study. Whilst this evolves the research into problematic areas of data construction by the researcher, it may be compliant with ethical guidance. Nevertheless, similar to the guidance on privacy, obtaining consent via chat forums may depend on the nature of study. Ethnographic studies involving chat rooms of white racist groups would present a strong argument for not seeking informed consent as the act of revealing the researchers' identity and purpose of the research would have deterred open expression of views

Conclusion

In conclusion, the boundaries of public and private spaces overlap in cyberspace (Watson et al., 2007; Convery and Cox 2012). However, if participants in online environments assume or believe that their communication is private, there should be a greater obligation on the part of the researcher to protect individual privacy (through maintaining confidentiality and anonymity and seeking informed consent).

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