Toward Ethical Cyberspace Audience Research: Strategies for Using the Internet for Television Audience Studies

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This article examines the possibilities for qualitative audience study afforded by the Internet, carefully detailing both the benefits and dangers of such research. In answer to methodological issues resulting from online communication with subjects, the essay calls for the application of various feminist and anthropological methodological practices, and considers methodological dilemmas related to perceived privacy, natural data and lurking, informed consent procedures, balancing anonymity, and data accessibility. In the course of outlining methodological considerations especially salient when finding audiences through Internet spaces, we reflect on our own dilemmas in designing studies that meet the ethical standards of feminist methodology.

The increasing dissemination of Internet technologies may provide the greatest revolution in the study of media audiences since critical media scholars began turning their attention to audiences in the early 1980s. As is often the case with new technologies and applications, computer-mediated communication (CMC) provides a previously unimaginable tool, but also forces a revision of the standards and practices that governed qualitative audience study prior to its introduction. Researchers in a variety of fields have begun adapting traditional methodological practices and ethics to the new research tool of CMC and the "field space" provided by the Internet, but using the Web to research audiences of television series poses specific challenges that this research has not addressed.

This particular article and the type of research it envisions require slightly revised concepts of field and audience. The changing nature of "going into the field" depends largely upon how researchers use the Internet and the new virtual spaces it offers. Throughout most of this article, we primarily focus on the Internet as a *tool* for research rather than as a *space* to research. In this approach, the Internet facilitates communication by helping to find audience members (who become respondents)

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and documenting their discussions of media texts. This makes Internet audience research unlike ethnography in many ways and much more akin to audience research that examines solicited letters or those sent to producers. (In other approaches, the space of the Internet functions more as a "field" because the research focuses on the spaces of the Internet or takes place in real time, as in the case of chat room discussions.)

But why open the Pandora's box of Internet-based audience research and what is to be gained? The Internet alleviates many logistical problems that seem insignificant singularly, but often compound until the complexity of an audience study detracts researchers from attempting these projects. However, Internet research simultaneously introduces new limitations, as researchers must be aware of who has the access, time, and knowledge to participate in Internet forums—especially when the research focuses on television viewers. Both the advantages and disadvantages acknowledged here illustrate the need for researchers to be reflexive and critical in research design and process. Internet-based audience research can be exceptionally helpful in gaining distinct snapshots of viewer response and understanding of texts. Broad analyses of various discussion forums for the same show may yield interesting contrasts or exceptional similarity, both findings that may be worthy of scholarly comment. The less labor intensive venue of Web forums may help researchers add audience study to a textual or institutional analysis, consequently expanding understandings of a show or phenomenon and increasing the voices heard.

Although a growing body of television audience research using Internet technologies is emerging, many studies have not specifically attended to the vast methodological variation encompassed among those who use "the Internet" in their studies. The works of Scodari (1998), Harris and Alexander (1998), Baym (2000), and Zweerink and Gatson (2002) illustrate the form and value of such studies but do not emphasize the specific ethical and/or methodological issues involved in this type of research. Instead, much of the work addressing ethical issues and Internet methodology has emerged in other academic fields, nonetheless providing invaluable guidelines that suggest starting points for the discussion of Internet audience research in the field of television studies (Ess & the AOIR Ethics Working Committee, 2002; Hine, 2000; Jones, 1999; Mann & Stewart, 2000; Markham, 1998). Consequently, we offer the following as the beginning of a conversation among researchers who use the Internet for audience research in order to build theory and method through frank dialogue about the methodological limits and challenges we face.

The following examination may raise more questions than it answers. This essay seeks to make the practice of turning to Internet forums for audience research problematic, while still acknowledging their value. Creating ethically responsible methodology is complex, and no one practice fits all. Ultimately, Web-based research requires that researchers consider the effects of their work and seek to minimize negative consequences for the communities they study. We emphasize the importance of reflexivity throughout the research process and developing multi-sited research projects as two key strategies. In the limited space here, we focus on

strategies characteristic of reflexivity, but comment briefly on multi-sited research methods in the conclusion.

Issues for Ethical Cyberspace Methods

We identify three primary methodological factors that make Internet research fundamentally different from that done in the "real world:" the issue of perceived privacy, the option of gaining consent or lurking, and the challenge of balancing anonymity with data accessibility. We discuss existing scholarship that explores these methodological issues and our experiences in order to outline strategies for conducting ethical research that utilizes feminist methodologies. The breadth of relevant literature is much more extensive than that cited here; rather, we acknowledge key works and emphasize examples drawn from our experiences.

Perceived Privacy

Online communication is often seductive. When sitting alone, typing at a computer, and contributing to a strand of discussion including only a few discussants, individuals may have a sense that their contribution is private when it is not. King (1996) describes perceived privacy as the "degree to which group members perceive their message to be private," and acknowledges that variance in perceived privacy depends upon context. He offers academic e-mail discussion groups as spaces with low expectations of privacy and support groups and discussions organized around a socially sensitive subject as spaces with high perceived privacy (p. 126). The inability to know who is "there" in the discussion space—but not actively contributing (a practice referred to as "lurking")—additionally confuses perceptions of privacy. In many contexts, including sites featuring audience discussion, contributors may have a high sense of perceived privacy because a discussion occurs among a few people, with no indication of how many are lurking, or that the discussion could be archived and available for years after the posting.

In a similar vein, Waskul and Douglass (1996) offer the distinctions of "privately public" and "publicly private" online interaction spaces in order to address the way that "public and private spheres become conceptually and experientially blurred, as the medium increasingly embodies neither, but both" (p. 131). This blurring provides a significant consideration for determining the ethics of fair use and access. Although in legal terms, many Web-based message boards in which viewers discuss series are "public" spaces (accessible to anyone who finds them), ethically, researchers must consider how contributors often experience these spaces as private. Waskul and Douglass argue that "the publicness of a context does not preclude the emergence of private interactions, is not a sufficient license to invade the privacy of others, and does not relieve the researcher from ethical commitments of informing participants of research intent" (p. 133). In a similar analysis, Sixsmith and Murray (2001)

illustrate the complicated interconnections among privacy, ownership, and authorship in online communication—interconnections that make it difficult, if not impossible, to privilege all of these concerns in constructing an ethical research project. Significantly, sociologists (particularly those studying aspects of health) have offered much of the existing scholarship considering the ethics of accounting for perceived privacy, and many of the examples used in their articles are of a more intimate nature than most discussions of a television series. Ultimately, researchers must uphold a standard of protecting participants from harm as the guiding factor in making methodological decisions.

Informed Consent and Lurking

Questions about methods for pursuing research requiring natural data and the ethics of lurking are related to problems of determining the public or private nature of online communication. This is particularly a concern for researchers analyzing online audience discussions as texts. Herring (1996) queries the use of natural data from the perspective of a linguist who analyzes spoken language data and often confronts the "Observer's Paradox"—the problem of collecting authentic data without the process of collection (the observer's presence) interfering with the phenomena observed. In Herring's case, alerting a discussion community to her presence could result in participants paying greater attention to the prescribed norms of language use. Audience researchers may confront this paradox when examining viewer response to certain issues without wishing to direct viewers to a specific subject. In an exploration of audience reaction to the Lifetime series *Any Day Now,* a series about the friendship of two women of different ethnicities who grew up together in 1960s Birmingham, Alabama, Lotz (2000) was curious about how the viewers regarded the characters' relationship to feminism. Feminist discourse in the series is mainly implicit, evident in subtle characterizations rather than explicit dialogue. After months of observing the culture of the message board, Lotz felt that posting a question to the group about feminism, or even of the characters as "strong women" would result in encouraging a certain reading. Consequently, she based her analyses on the viewers' unprompted discussion.

When assessing the ethics of lurking on this message board (one sponsored by the Lifetime network and connected to the series' official Web site), Lotz considered criteria proposed by Waskul and Douglass (1996) such as the size and nature of the forum and the intrusiveness of the study to the participants. In the two seasons of data she considered, over 300 different individuals participated, with a core group that maintained at least periodic contributions. Discussions rarely deviated from the series and the lead characters. Because of the series' discourse on racism and ethnic difference, contributions were more personal in nature at times, such as comparing a personal interracial dating experience with one depicted in the series. Despite the more personal nature of these messages, they were often presented as arguments to the group on the importance of "colorblind" love or an explanation of why it was

important to some viewers that the African American character date an African American man—communication designed more as public appeal than as private utterance.

The other proposed criteria of intrusiveness must also be weighed in each context. King (1996) writes a cautionary tale about an Internet-based support group that disbanded after too many researchers tried to examine the group. Indeed, an exceptional amount of caution must be used in studying what King terms "groups with socially sensitive content"—a determination requiring conscientiousness and reflexivity by researchers. Although it did not appear that fans discussing *Any Day Now* tread upon sensitive content, it is possible that audience researchers could encounter such a situation.

Balancing Anonymity and Data Accessibility

Negotiating the tension between the need to allow others to reproduce one's work to confirm analyses (which requires locating the discussion and the respondents) and the need to protect the anonymity of respondents provides a third concern for audience researchers using Web-based forums. Social science researchers have suggested various practices for attempting to maintain anonymity. King (1996) proposes removing all headers, signatures, references within the citation to any person's name or user name, and references to the name and type of group as strategies for ethical cyberspace research (p. 127). Abiding by these practices prevents those reading research from determining the identity of the respondents. Herring (1996) suggests such measures are too extreme, but acknowledges context is crucial to making determinations about the stringency of methods used to maintain anonymity. King (1996) constructs his example in one of the most intimate discussion contexts imaginable, proposing guidelines for researching a discussion among sexual abuse survivors. Likely, many contexts of research require less caution in making the identity of the discussion group and discussants available. Herring (1996) acknowledges that she does not use message senders' real names, but does identify open-access discussion groups.

The precise research question one explores offers an indication of where the ethical balance between participant anonymity and data accessibility lies. In Herring's work, the identity of the participant is reportedly irrelevant; she studies how language is used, not who uses it. King's research makes the identity of the participant relevant, in that they are sexual abuse survivors. Because of the socially sensitive nature of this identity, King must then work to preserve the anonymity of the group. In general, it seems unlikely that most audience researchers would encounter data as sensitive as that found in King's research. Despite this less socially sensitive context, audience researchers must utilize the least obtrusive methodology, and many options exist. When including direct quotations from a discussion, one could cite the posting's date, making it possible for a reader truly intrigued with the utterance, or in doubt of the analysis, to find the comment in context if the discussion

is archived. To provide some anonymity, one could identify the Web site or group, but not the name of the participant, as does Herring. This allows a curious reader to examine the types of discussion occurring online and confirm or dispute the analysis. To maximize anonymity, researchers can eliminate any recognizable attribution, just citing "a Web-based discussion of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer.*"

While some may protest making primary sources inaccessible, it is worthwhile to consider whether readers have access to audience data gained in more traditional audience research contexts. When a researcher examines fan letters sent to a producer, we take on faith that the letters exist and that the analysis is representative. Similarly, when a researcher conducts a focus group or interview, readers also assume that the transcripts are accurate and in proper context. At least within critical audience research praxis, a rigid tradition of verifying results does not exist. Internet research introduces variables that result in participants whose "locations" and accessibility shift, which must be considered as important aspects of privacy and anonymity. One's initial efforts to protect information can be subverted at any moment, making this a formidable challenge (Ess & the AOIR Ethics Working Committee, 2002; Mann & Stewart, 2000).

Locations for Addressing Research Ethics

The research process provides multiple places in which researchers must make decisions regarding these issues, including when they enter a site, how they pursue informed consent procedures, how they facilitate exchange with participants throughout the process, and how they respond to the often unavoidable, yet unanticipated need to change research designs. Focusing on specific moments in the research process helps identify the many possible moments in which researchers can intervene and address the ethics of their method.

Entering the Site

Incorporating ethical methods requires that researchers be reflexive and empha-size participant well-being as they select their strategy for entering the online community—whether for observing, participating, or soliciting survey respondents. Researchers are wise to heed a site's communication norms. In some cases, explicit rules may exist; in other situations rules may be more implicit. Additionally, norms can change, requiring the researcher to accommodate expectations of adjustments from participants if a shift occurs (for example, from a chat room to a Web page, or from a Web page to e-mail). Different types of sites will also demand different approaches; a fan-created site will operate differently than one created by a televi-sion network, and the increasing presence of underwriting sponsors poses particular variables as well. Learning about chosen sites before entering provides a valuable

strategy for avoiding harm (Anderson, 1998; Hakken, 1999; Lindlof & Meyer, 1998; Lindlof & Shatzer, 1998; Mann & Stewart, 2000).

Informed Consent Procedures

The established requirements for research on human subjects emphasize the role of informed consent in protecting participants. The uncertainty of transactions not occurring face-to-face provides an important consideration for obtaining informed consent online. For dissertation research reported in Ross (2002), university policy required that she conform to a standardized informed consent process that did not recognize the context of online research. Although institutional standards may be satisfied by using general consent forms for online research, participants' concerns about their own protection may not be met by forms that do not acknowledge the specificity of online contexts. Researchers should anticipate such concerns that they may arise after consent has been given, even if institutional policies do not make such a requirement.

Informed consent should not merely be a legal or institutional hurdle to overcome; it should be sought in the spirit of protecting those participating, the human faces beyond the screen. A correspondence with a participant highlighted the potential danger of online communication to conceal participants' needs and anxieties as we wrote this article. A respondent who had consented to and returned additional survey questions for Ross's project, sent an e-mail (from a new address) saying she had reread the consent form and her answers and felt that she needed a better understanding of the consent form's meaning. The realization that the project could be published (she recognized this due to the consent form) and that it could become a generally-circulated publication due to its popular television subject triggered her concerns. She queried Ross's ethical guidelines: Why was informed consent necessary? Could she change her mind later, or view the analysis before publication? What were the researcher's political beliefs about the participants' opinions (about sexuality), and would political difference create a problem? This series of questions reminded Ross of the person behind the e-mail. If researchers engage with a virtual community of participants, they must remember that people can come and go—and disappear, making it essential to ensure that participants are able to contact them if concerns develop.

Exchange throughout the Research Process

Conceptualizing research as a process of exchange (rather than a one-sided relationship of the researcher "taking" from participants) is paramount to feminist methodology. Framing one's work as a process of exchange emphasizes the research project as a series of actions inflected with political and social value. Recognizing that human subjects research requires exchange helps researchers guide their

decision-making toward sustaining a sense of responsibility to and respect for their respondents.

For online audience research, exchange may manifest itself most importantly in determining the level of communication that researchers maintain with their participants; a decision to lurk precludes exchange to a certain extent. Making these decisions requires reflexive assessment. For example, in our individual work, we each considered the larger purposes of our projects and came to different decisions about the level of interaction with research subjects. One of us chose to lurk after examining this choice in relation to potential harm (Lotz, 2000) and the other chose to more explicitly communicate with subjects (Ross, 2002). Kauffman (1992) argues that both researchers and the researched produce meaning, and attending to this duality is ethically and methodologically necessary.

Another strategy for incorporating exchange results from contemplating whether we can aid the groups we study. For example, can we help fans understand institutional factors that explain why a show may be canceled? In the *Any Day Now* discussion (Lotz, 2000), there was frequent concern over the tendency to rerun episodes during "sweeps" ratings periods. Researchers can address such concerns, in this case, explain that cable networks do not observe the same "sweeps" periods of analysis used by broadcast networks. Can we provide resources and information that we have found in our research that may be of interest or value to the viewers? Or can we provide participants with our results—for example, by creating an online site where they can access the finished project (Allen, 1996; Lindlof & Shatzer, 1998; Scodari, 1998). While these strategies may seem insignificant, designing research with ways to reciprocate participants in mind can yield more ethical research practices.

Consistent with the arguments of several scholars, exchange extends to requesting feedback from participants to ensure the accuracy of representation and to supplement intentional reflexivity (Allen, 1996; Anderson, 1998; Hakken, 1999). Allen (1996) presented all text written about her respondents back to them at various times throughout her fieldwork and while writing up results. She included participants' responses to her drafts in the final version, explicitly noting where they had requested changes. Including exchange in the process of analysis is complicated and researchers must consider when such practices are disruptive. The use of exchange and reflexive negotiations of process should be discussed in the final reporting of data, as suggested by both Kauffman (1992) and Allen (1996). Researchers must realize that the level of interaction and exchange will vary among projects. It is, frankly, *human* subjects research we are discussing, and all too often the sterile environments of online communication can obscure this.

Changing Research Designs

Research goals and foci often shift during the development of a project and the process of gathering information. Such changes are reasonable and to be expected.

However, we must inform participants of changes and allow them to adjust their consent accordingly. For example, in Ross's project about reception of the series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Xena: Warrior Princess,* she added questions after participants completed the initial questionnaire. Some of the participants chose to remain in the project and not answer the additional questions (about the sexual orientation of characters); others acknowledged that the new questions indicated a shift in the project and wished to withdraw. Needing to re-contact participants created an ethical and methodological dilemma. Several participants who completed the first questionnaire "disappeared" in the sense that their e-mail accounts were no longer active. In an attempt to protect the participants, Ross decided to eliminate the initial questionnaires of those she could not reach with the additional questions. She did not feel entitled to assume continued consent because the original project described in the informed consent agreement had evolved.

Those participants Ross reached responded in a variety of ways. Some requested that she eliminate all potential markers of their identity from their responses; others specified that identifying information could remain, but did not respond to the questions; and some withdrew entirely. The new focus pleased other participants who now desired to be identified by name. This experience reinforced the importance of disseminating information to participants as a way to ensure that research does not disenfranchise them. Such experiences are especially likely to occur with work on television reception, due to the constantly changing nature of the television series in general. Hakken (1999) argues that ethnography is co-discovery, making sharing information (such as changes in focus) paramount. As several on-line researchers note, the intent to publish or disseminate information affords a position of power that must be taken seriously in all cases of human subject research, but especially with online research (Allen, 1996; Boehlefeld, 1996; Hakken, 1999; Taylor, 1999).

Conclusion

Based on existing research from other disciplines exploring the field of cyberspace, it is clear that a set of universally applied rules for Internet-based audience research is both impractical and potentially harmful to the further development of this research tool. In closing, we reiterate reflexivity and constructing multi-sited studies as two strategies particularly useful to conducting ethical Internet research of television audiences. Online interactions demand extra vigilance in making methodological decisions that protect participants because of the uncertainty of communication in which the researcher cannot visually gauge a respondent's understanding, or even if respondents accurately represent their identity.

Reflexive research practices interrogate assumptions made throughout the research process, assist researchers in assessing the consequences of their actions, and ensure that they act responsibly—from project conception to publication. A reflexive

researcher makes methodological choices with attention to how actions are value-laden, a perspective that moves beyond evaluating these decisions as efforts to maximize research value (see Tedlock, 1991). Taylor (1999) recommends considering why one chooses to use the Internet before beginning a project, since the ease of the Internet may lead researchers to choose it primarily for reasons of expediency and monetary expense that could ultimately interfere with the goals of the research project. Assessing one's motivation helps ensure research that is fully realized, and researchers should address their ethical dilemmas in recording their work. As described by Hakken (1999), "good ethnography . . . inevitably involves significant, reflective meta-discourse, as opposed to only implicit theorizing" (p. 3). This is an important tenet to keep in mind as the often impersonal nature of online research can encourage researchers to interpret what subjects say and do without considering the many ways in which online settings can alter meanings (see Lindlof & Shatzer, 1998).

Even though researchers may not interact directly with research subjects (in the sense that they are not communicating face-to-face), and online observations may not be known (e.g. lurking), an exchange occurs simply through the researcher's presence online. Hakken (1999) argues that in cyberspace, what is said *is* what is being done—and we would add that what is *not* said is also what is being done. Reflexivity provides researchers with an essential tool in designing ethical research. However, reflexive research does not guarantee that respondents make fully informed decisions or that researchers represent participants responsibly.

In addition to reflexivity, recent anthropological literature on ethnography has noted the use of multi-sited ethnography—studies using multiple data sites and methods—to gain more comprehensive understanding (Marcus, 1995). Green (1999) argues that the very nature of virtual systems (and arguably other CMC contexts) makes problematic conventional notions of the field and practices of fieldwork to such an extent that they require flexible and multi-sited methodology. Hampton and Wellman (1999) use such a multi-sited approach, one that combines observation of online communication, interviews, and even living among those in an experimental high-speed, wired community. Heath, Koch, Ley and Montoya (1999) consider ways to incorporate "offline approaches" to "online work" in order to examine how these separate, but connected, aspects of life relate and coexist. Based on the rather widespread exploration of multi-sited methodologies among those in other disciplines who examine CMC, it appears prudent that media scholars turn their attention to these approaches as well. Indeed, to the degree that television viewing remains in large part an "offline" activity (although we expect on- and offline worlds will continue to merge), methodologies that explore viewers' understanding of the relations of these two worlds will yield vital insights.

The Internet offers enormous opportunities for scholars in a range of fields, and it is inappropriate to apply the most stringent guidelines, or most extreme case scenarios to all researchers. Instead, we propose a continued public discussion of the ethics of Internet research within individual disciplines, across the academy, and

extending outside of the academy as well. Sharing our struggles may provide new insight.

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