Introductory remarks

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«Internet research» does not make up one unified object. The term denotes a wide array of research on Internet activities and structures, as well as research that utilizes the Internet as a source of data or even of processing. There is still good reason to make Internet research the unifying topic of an ethical treatment, however, for many forms of Internet research confront us with the same or similar ethical challenges.

In a given Internet research project, there is sometimes real worry or disagreement about what will constitute the best solution from an ethical point of view. It is relevant to this state of affairs that the relative novelty of the technology and practices involved can sometimes make it difficult to see when two cases are ethically similar in a relevant way and when they are not. Similarly, it is not always entirely clear whether and to what extent we may transfer our experiences from other areas of research to Internet research. In some respects, Internet research seems to be part of a broader technological development that confronts us with substantially new challenges, and to the extent that this is true, there will be less of a well-established practice on how to handle them. Some of these challenges also seem to apply to the judicial sphere when it comes to formulating and interpreting relevant laws.

To provide something by way of a very rough sketch of the sort of issues that confront us, many of the ethically relevant questions

voiced about Internet research concern personal information, and are posed in terms of access, protection, ownership, or validity. These questions are especially relevant when the research concerns what is often referred to as Big Data, our amassed digital traces constituting enormous data sets available to others. The fact that much of this information has been created and spread willingly generates complex questions about degrees of legitimacy for the researcher who chooses to appropriate and recontextualize that information, sometimes also with the potential of re-identification through purportedly anonymized data. The issues are naturally made even more complex in cases of third person information, or where the individual is a child or young person.

Person-related information that is available online to researchers (and others) covers the entire spectrum from the trivial and commonly known to the deeply sensitive and personal. Along another ethically relevant axis, one encounters information that is openly available to anyone interested at one extreme, and information that is protected by access restrictions or encryption at the other extreme.

There is also the question of the impact that research can have on the object of research, i.e., whether there is a risk of harm to participants, and whether and to what extent one should demand that the research constitutes a good to others besides the researcher. This is a feature shared by all research on human beings. But in the case of Internet research, it is often the case that the impact (and the importance of the impact) are particularly difficult to foresee; think, e.g., of how research on an individual or a group online can affect those people's behavior, either as a direct consequence of the researcher's presence or as an indirect consequence of the publication of the results.

Moreover, in much Internet research, the data that is collected, systematized, and interpreted is generated in contexts other than

those of research. Questions arise as to when exceptions from consent are justified, as well as to how consent may be obtained in a voluntary and informed manner in an online setting. In research on or with human beings, voluntary informed consent constitutes a sort of gold standard, deviations from which in most contexts require special justification. While the requirement of voluntary informed consent is grounded in respect for research subjects, a related strategy for ensuring ethically responsible practice in cases where consent might not be required is to take steps to inform the relevant persons about the research that is carried out.

Finally, it bears mention that ten years ago, there was precious little hint of how important social media would be today, and it is as difficult – i.e., impossible – for us to predict what might appear on our online horizon in the coming years. So while sorting out the ethically salient differences between practices and platforms is of great importance for finding responsible ethical solutions, we should also keep in mind the importance of realizing that both habits and technology can change the premises of the discussion swiftly and dramatically.

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In his contribution, *Dag Elgesem* discusses research on social media and the requirements relating to information and consent. With regard to the requirement of consent, he argues that there is a crucial distinction between a situation in which participating in the research entails a risk of harm, and a situation in which there is no such risk, but the research challenges the individual's control over information about herself.

As Internet research evolves, there is also a great need for knowledge about the legal requirements related to using the Internet as a data source. In her contribution, *Katrine Segadal* gives an overview of the key legal documents regulating this area of research. While

the main rule is that that the processing of personal information should be based on informed consent, this is not a rule without important exceptions.

Charles Ess focuses on how our understandings of human self-hood and identity have begun to shift towards relational conceptions. These shifts are accompanied, he points out, by changing conceptions regarding morality and responsibility. For example, the obligation to protect privacy is not only an obligation vis-à-vis the individual, but also an obligation towards groups.

Marika Lüders discusses research on online practices, using two examples from her own research. Even though there is a potential public character of the content and people being studied, this does not warrant the public display and exposure of the research subjects, she argues. She holds that traditional research ethics, securing the privacy of the research subject, remains a key obligation, and so a primary challenge is how to conduct this type of research without compromising the individuals being studied.

Elisabeth Staksrud addresses pressing questions raised by research on children's online communication. She highlights the importance of including children when researching online environments. Drawing on examples, she provides input as to how this aim may be accomplished in a responsible manner.

Kari Steen-Johansen and *Bernard Enjolras* focus on the use of Big Data in research. Recognizing that Big Data presents researchers with new opportunities for analyzing social phenomena, they also stress how such data has its limitations and introduces a set of new ethical and practical challenges, not least related to how ownership and access to data are regulated.

Anders Olof Larsson deals with ethical and methodological challenges arising when gathering masses of data from social media services, such as Twitter and Facebook. Besides articulating a related range of difficulties having to do with discerning ethically

salient differences from one form of social media service to another, Larsson also discusses how differences in access among researchers might constitute a problem in its own right.

Robindra Prabhu makes the point that while we should attend to the pressing concerns relating to privacy and integrity that are raised by Big Data, we should not lose sight of the many issues that fall outside the traditional privacy debate relating to the effects the use of these data may have on human activities. He argues that these new challenges will require strong governance and legal protections.