



Involving the Virtual Subject

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Abstract. As users of computer networks have become more active in producing their own electronic records, in the form of transcripts of online discussions, ethicists have attempted to interpret this new situation in terms of earlier models of personal data protection. But this transference results in unprecedented problems for researchers. This paper examines some of the central dichotomies and paradoxes in the debate on research ethics online in the context of the concrete study of a virtual community that we carried out. We argue that alienation, not privacy, is the actual core of the ethical problems of virtual community research. While practically everybody is allowed and often welcome to join online communities (which undermines the claim to privacy), most participants would agree that members and visitors are not authorized to use, or ‘harvest,’ or sell the product of the group communication. To do that, they would be expected to ask for permission preferably before the content has been produced, thus granting participants’ right to control their own product. This ‘non-alienation principle’ should be the basis of emergent social conventions in cyberspace. It would apply to researchers as to anyone else. With certain types of research, we suggest, cyberspace provides unique opportunities for empowering subjects by involving them as contributors in the research project.

Key words: cyberspace, online community, privacy, research ethics, virtual community

Introduction

From a rather unregulated enterprise a few years ago, the research on virtual communities has recently become the focus of multiple ethical concerns and debates in some cases amounting to a moral panic over privacy and intrusion (see Cavanagh, 1999). The early online data rush which treated every content found on the Net as open to downloading, analyzing and quoting has been countered by an ethical perfectionism leaving almost no space for research on virtual forums. Social life in cyberspace defies existing procedures for obtaining informed consent from research subjects and groups. In a recent report on the ethical and legal aspects of human subject research on the Internet Frankel and Siang (1999) point to three features of the Internet that pose considerable difficulties in this respect: the blurred distinction between the private versus public domain, the ease of anonymous and pseudonymous communication, and its global reach.

Our research on the ethics of virtual community brought us face to face with these problems. Our project aims to grasp the meaning of virtual community and its sustaining ethical principles as they are perceived by community members themselves. To pursue this project we obviously needed access to the

activities of online groups. Our effort to justify our study of online community ran into serious resistance from anonymous reviewers concerned about the privacy of virtual human subjects. Here are examples of these concerns:

Can one study these electronic communities in ways that are ethically appropriate with respect to privacy?... Researchers will be listening to sensitive issues. Will they get approval? Listservs are identified as public behavior... but this is a volatile issue.

So, how do the PIs propose to assure the subjects the PIs’ access to online community will not violate their privacy? How will the privacy of those who do not consent to participate be protected – won’t they still be in communication with those who do consent, thereby making their communications accessible to the PIs?

How are sensitive issues, that are likely to arise, screened out?

Moreover, since the participants in the discussions will be identifiable, the investigators should have a clear plan in place for offering and ensuring as much confidentiality as possible.

It is not really surprising that privacy has finally become an issue in online research. Privacy concerns

have received the lion's share of attention in the related area of computer ethics because of the unprecedented implications of storing so many vital personal records online. Medical records in particular are no longer sacrosanct in a world of rapid access to data. Their unauthorized use may have very concrete negative consequences for individuals. As users of computers have become more active in producing their own computer records, in the form of transcripts of online discussions, ethicists have attempted to interpret this new situation in terms of the earlier model of privacy. But this transference of the model of personal data protection to virtual social interactions results in unprecedented problems for researchers.

In order to address these issues we had to consider some of the central dichotomies and paradoxes in the debate on research ethics online. Our starting point was a special issue of *The Information Society*.¹ In this issue, researchers representing different disciplines and methodological orientations reflect collectively on the ethics of their own cyberspace research.

For these researchers the foremost factor determining ethical access and use of group data in cyberspace is whether the group operates in the public domain, or in a private, restricted space.² Contributors such as Herring (1996: 159, 165–166) argue that any group whose interactions take place in the public domain can be observed by researchers without explicit announcement and solicitation of consent from participants. Such seems to have been the actual practice of Herring herself along with other pioneer researchers of MUDs (Reid, Allen, see *Ibid.* 169–175; 175–189) who have treated statements posted in public bulletin boards or rooms in MUDs as public data. However, the status of an online forum in terms of its publicness/privacy is ambiguous. The question: "Is technical accessibility equal to publicness?" has been raised repeatedly. Many researchers answer this question in the affirmative, arguing that "Some spaces are simply public by their brute empirical nature – anybody can get to them – Coyote" (Malcolm Parks³ in the 1997 MediaMOO symposium). Frankel and Siang (1999) call this stance "the technological point of view."

Others insist that researchers should take seriously the "perceived privacy" (King 1996: 119–129) of forums as experienced by group participants. But if

¹ The Ethics of Fair Practices for Collecting Social Science Data in Cyberspace, *The Information Society* (Vol. 12, No. 2, 1996).

² The importance of this distinction has been reiterated by Frankel and Siang (1999).

³ This statement is not necessarily representative of Parks' own approach as it becomes clear throughout the discussion

these forums are defined as private, it follows that subjects should be asked for their permission to be observed in all circumstances and the feelings of individual members should be reckoned with when the unit of study is a group. Taken to the extreme, these requirements could mean that subjects should always be informed and agree to be studied, and that the refusal of one group member to participate in a research project focusing on her group could block the whole undertaking.

Given these disagreements, how were we to determine the publicness or privacy of the online group/community we wished to study? The existing literature regarding ethics of access unfortunately offered only limited practical help. Robson and Robson (1999), for example, present a continuum of levels of privacy in real and virtual settings that is meant to serve as a guide to researchers like ourselves. Spanning the range between web sites/billboards, as the pole of publicness, to private chat/telephone conversations, as the privacy end, this continuum still leaves our chosen object of study – virtual communities represented by open mailing lists and computer conferences – in the intermediate gray area.⁴

Our project

Our project examining the ethics of virtual community represents a typical case of online research in this gray area. Methodologically, the best way to collect data on group discussions would probably be not to reveal one's presence and task to group members in order not to affect their behavior and thus to be able to capture their naturally occurring discourse. This is technically feasible in the case of all online forums that are open to anyone to join. From an ethical perspective, however, if we had performed this kind of "naturalistic" observation on unsuspecting subjects, we would have been little better than spies, a rather incongruous position for a research project on the *ethics* of virtual community. We therefore decided to seek consent from the group before the start of the data collection. We thought that the obvious solution to these conflicting requirements would be to get permission to study the archive of its past communications before the research intervened. If only the process had been so simple! In fact we were to find surprises and paradoxes from the very beginning of our research.

⁴ Frankel and Siang (1999) construct a similar classification based on the "degree of group accessibility" and conclude, like we do, that the question of how public and private domains should be defined for research in cyberspace remains open.

From the conceptual to the empirical object

Our conceptual object was “virtual community.” To translate this into an object of empirical study, we had to pick one, or two, or more concrete and living virtual communities. We will leave out the question of the definition of virtual community, and for the purposes of this exposition, will assume that we had in mind a more or less clear general idea of our object. However, the Internet buzzes with thousands of group formations, not all of them matching our conceptual model of virtual community. To select appropriate ones, we had to learn something about some of these groups, collecting background information on multiple online communities. Thus the selection of appropriate communities to be examined turned out to belong to the research process itself. But should this preliminary observation and information collection also be placed under the ethics of research guidelines? Are we, as researchers selecting an object for our study, under the ethical obligation to inform the members of the mailing lists or newsgroups or MUDs we are joining that what motivates us is research interest? The lack of a definitive answer to this question left us with a somewhat guilty feeling as we had already joined (subscribed to) the online community (the mailing list) to which we negotiated access openly later.

This selection process would have involved such “prospecting drills” into a bigger number of online groups and would have made us even guiltier of unannounced lurking, if we had not used a classical ethnographic technique – an informant. In the context of previous research, one of us had met a woman who claimed to be a member of a “genuine” long-term virtual community based on solidarity, mutual caring and respect. Since the online group in question seemed to match the criteria underlying our search, we decided to seek consent from its members.

From researchers’ experiences to data

Subscribing to that mailing list, or in other words, lurking in that group, before its formal OK to the research, we had the chance to receive, read and keep on our computers the discussion provoked by the posting of our call for participation by the list moderator. This discussion is quite illuminating with regard to feelings and concerns of potential research subjects. Knowing of these feelings and concerns could be helpful to researchers who struggle to elaborate ethical approaches. However, the circumstances under which we learned about these feelings and concerns were not ethically sound since consent had not yet been granted. At what point do we stop learning about the social world in which we are enmeshed as human

beings having experiences and start learning about it as researchers having ethical responsibilities? Does the knowledge we gain before that point matter? Is it ethical to disseminate it among fellow-researchers, students, readers, etc.? Under what conditions? We will see that the answer to these questions depends on the subtle distinction between what is public in the sense of easily accessible and what is public in the sense that it is related to a legitimate public interest.

After several days of online discussion of our call to group members, they reached an agreement. The group shared the feeling that authors of postings to the list should know what their comments might be used for “up front,” at the time they were producing them. This prevented us from using the archive. While for us, the archival approach was a guarantee of “naturalistic discourse” and non-disruption of the group’s ongoing activities, for list members it was problematic because past posts were not meant to be analyzed in a study. This agreement has shaped our reflections on research ethics presented in the remainder of this paper.

Privacy or non-alienation?

Virtual groups are indeed a peculiar social form escaping clear definition. Some have called them perhaps accurately but not very helpfully “publicly private” and “privately public” (Waskul and Douglass, 1996: 131). In a recent paper, Cavanagh (1999) has drawn on Goffman’s work to argue that:

... public and private are far from monolithic definitions to guide action. Rather all such definitions are locally produced and are therefore relative to the individual communal structures within which they are rendered meaningful. ... Only an engagement with the frameworks of meaning and relevance of the individual communities as revealed through the forms and rituals of interaction can yield an understanding of these issues. (paragraph 14)

In many ways virtual communities resemble what Goffman (1963: 154) called “accessible engagements,” a face engagement, or immediate engagement of a group of people with each other, that is carried out in a situation containing bystanders. In such settings, Goffman observes, social arrangements arise to regulate the communication taking place. Properly conducted members of the community will recognize communication barriers allowing for a “conventional situational closure” even in the absence of actual “physical closure.” Thus we easily recognize and honor the communication barrier existing between

ourselves and a group of people engaged in a conversation in the public park or cafe. Applying this Goffmanian approach to privacy in public Cavanagh (1999) notes that aspects of identity are more easily appropriated by others in the online setting. This loss of control over the “dissemination of the self” results, she argues, from violations of the “conversational preserve” – “the right of a set of individuals once engaged in talk, to have their circle protected from entrance and over-hearing by others” (Goffman, 1971: 64, quoted in Cavanagh, 1999).

However, no social conventions have been established yet to regulate the communication boundaries of a gathering in cyberspace. How, then, is the conversational preserve to be demarcated there? One of the few shared beliefs people have about online communities is that they are essentially forums for meeting and communicating with others. Thus, online communities often welcome anyone who wishes to join. This ethos contradicts the argument for the right to privacy online. What sense does it make to ask for special permission to join a virtual community as a researcher when it is open to everyone to join as a participant? If people go online in order to be heard, why should they be concerned about privacy?

Nissenbaum (1998) has elaborated the concept of “contextual integrity” which offers insight into this apparent contradiction. Contextual integrity is the respect for the explicit and implicit norms governing how much information and what type of information subjects wish to provide about themselves in the myriad situations, transactions and relationships in which they are involved (see p. 581). Subjects’ own sense of relevance and appropriateness of the particular information for the particular set of circumstances is the criterion for contextual integrity. Nissenbaum (1998) argues that individuals have a right to reasonable “privacy in public” for many activities now subject to electronic surveillance such as purchasing habits. Nissenbaum’s concept of contextual integrity is helpful because it suggests a way of getting from Goffman’s well observed notion of conventional situational closure to appropriate ethical conclusions. But even this concept cannot quite encompass the contradictory character of online groups: their members often discuss matters of general public interest in an open setting which seems to imply publicness, yet they claim extraordinary rights over their own output.

What kind of rights? It seems to us that privacy is not in fact the central issue. Rather, the participants invest themselves in their common activity so deeply they feel a proprietary interest in their joint creation. The key to reconciling the ‘empirical’ openness (justly interpreted as publicness by many) of online communities with their members’ claims lies,

we suggest, in reformulating the problem in terms of the problematic of ownership. We will document this hypothesis from our observations of the group we studied.

Participation in online communities is a source of anxiety for members and observers alike as it involves a complex and yet to be understood dialectic of objectification and alienation. Objectification refers to producing material and symbolic traces of one’s conscious life. We objectify ourselves in the products of our action that are observable, interpretable and usable by other people. Objectification in this sense is akin to self-realization, voice, creativity and empowerment of the subject in the public realm. The Internet has opened up a rich variety of new forms of objectification. Alienation, on the other hand, implies the appropriation of the products of somebody’s action for purposes never intended or foreseen by the actor herself, drawing these products into a system of relations over which the producer has no knowledge or control. Henri Lefebvre wrote in his *Critique of Everyday Life*: “the philosopher may well go so far as to ask himself whether all realization, all objectification, does not involve an alienation as its own deep-seated negativity” (Lefebvre, 1991: 63). Whatever the general answer to this question, it is certainly true that by virtue of objectifying themselves in a variety of new forms, Internet users have made themselves vulnerable to new unforeseen forms of alienation. Alienation may not always be harmful to the person affected, but it is disrespectful and potentially disempowering of its victims. Participants in online forums are aware of the risks. One of our participants described the tension between self-objectification and alienation thus:

With some of the stuff I write, I am uncomfortable thinking it is going to be accessible for a long time but this is after all the Internet and it’s hardly private. Anyone can join the list. I try to think carefully before writing things, but then how does one do that totally and share oneself? The alternative, [that is] total privacy is to sit here in my house alone and not communicate. I’d give it about three weeks before total insanity set in.

We believe that alienation, not privacy, is the actual core of the ethical problem of most virtual community research. While practically everybody is allowed and often welcome to join online communities (which undermines the claim to privacy), participants seem generally to take it for granted that members are not authorized to use, or ‘harvest’ (see Sharf, 1999), or sell the product of the group communication. To do that, they would be expected to ask for permission preferably before the content has been produced, thus granting participants’ right to control their own

product. This ‘non-alienation principle’ should be the basis of emergent social conventions in cyberspace. It would apply to researchers as to anyone else.

An interesting illustration of the difference between privacy and non-alienation was provided by one member of the group we studied. In the process of our negotiation of access this woman categorically refused to allow us to save, analyze and quote her comments in the mailing list. She made a very clear distinction between two approaches to studying the list, one that she would accept without reservations, and another that was unacceptable. She was ready to let us observe the list and accumulate impressions of its life and then ask list members pointed questions on the basis of what we had seen. Then those answers, she thought, could be anonymously quoted. What she was reacting against was the possibility of estranging the product of her personal objectification, meant for one purpose and context, and putting it to use for another unrelated purpose beyond her control. Analyzing and quoting answers to researchers’ questions would be different from analyzing and quoting postings to the list in that answers were formulated to serve the purposes of the study. In her letter to us, the woman explained that she desperately needed the security of the list and the possibility that her comments would be quoted compromised this security: “Read all you’d like. I simply don’t want to be quoted,” she insisted.

This last remark is particularly revealing. It demonstrates clearly that not privacy, but alienation is this member’s central concern. She was posting her thoughts and feelings on the Internet for others to read and respond to. By doing that she was stepping out of her closed and controllable private world and exposing herself to others’ scrutiny. At the same time, she wanted to be able to trust that those she was opening herself up to would respect her intention in doing so. This trust would be violated if her words ended up in a study. Even the fact that we were asking for permission, that is, striving to establish non-alienation, was not sufficient for her.

The determination to avoid alienation could be recognized also in the reaction of the list moderator to our request to use past postings from the archive for our research in order not to disturb the ongoing communication of the group. The moderator responded:

The main issue is that when the folks sent the messages which are in the archives, they did not know that their comments might be used for something/some other purpose. I think it is important for folks to know this up front when they decide what they will post. I try to provide the folks on the list with some security and confidentiality, and to

respect what they have written, so these issues are important to me.

Ethics and research methods

Should the justifiable expectation and sometimes explicit demand for non-alienation be translated into a strict norm binding researchers of virtual communities to always seek informed consent? This would impede certain types of research that appear socially useful and do no harm to subjects beyond the formal alienation they imply. That harm is more easily mitigated (by anonymity for example) than injuries to basic rights or health at stake in more sensitive types of research such as clinical trials. Perhaps this is why our review of the literature on the ethics of virtual community research did not turn up publications that make a convincing argument for requiring informed consent under all circumstances. All authors recognized that certain research goals and methodologies are incompatible with informed consent and yet legitimate under particular circumstances.

Herring (1996) has brought to the fore the intricate connection between, research ethics and research objectives and methodology. Different types of research imply differences in the possible relationships between researcher and subjects and, consequently, in research ethics. The following classification illustrates her point:

- Naturalistic research: the researcher wants to disturb the “natural order” of the research object as little as possible, ideally, not at all.
- Participatory research: the researcher wants subjects to consciously reflect on the research questions and contribute to the research.
- Consensual/“Understanding” research: the researcher’s aim is to reconstruct the subject’s own view of the world.
- Critical research: the researcher puts subjects’ performance to a test/judgment under certain principles (of equity, fairness, ideological distortion, etc.).

Naturalistic and critical research are hard or impossible to reconcile with seeking informed consent, and yet they can be fully legitimate under certain circumstances. Exposure of male domination in electronic discussions for example is one research result that could not have been achieved if informed consent in the strict sense had to be received from those under study. Explaining to potential subjects the goals of the research and asking for their informed consent would either have changed their behavior substantively, or

would have met with rejection. Herring (1996) has presented a convincing argument in this sense.

On the other hand, it should be noted that participatory and consensual researches seem to have gained unprecedented new opportunities in the online environment. First of all, the electronic medium offers a level field for the encounter between subject and researcher. Not only the former, but also the latter has been "virtualized." In optimistic accounts, this means that the notorious white lab coat does not grant authority to the researcher while pressing the subject into submission. The opposite might be true as subjects remain protected by the relative anonymity of their e-mail addresses or avatar names, while the researcher exposes herself in all relevant detail when communicating with subjects.

Furthermore, the permanently open two-way communication channel between subjects and researchers allows a dialogue between them to take place. This dialogue need not be restricted in time and situation and driven by the research agenda, as is typically the case in face-to-face interviewing. Subjects retain the opportunity to talk back at any time, at no extra cost or inconvenience, thus sharing with the researcher the ability to initiate interaction and, potentially, to influence the direction of the study. The researcher and the research itself become objects for the subject to manipulate and appropriate.

In other words, doing research online presents us with new ways to involve the virtual subject as collaborator in our project. Furthermore, we would argue, this circumstance suggests new possibilities for elaborating a situated ethical approach elegantly combining research objectives and methods with subjects' right to non-alienation.

The postings to the list and the personal messages to us actively supporting our study confirm this point. They came from a category of participants in the online discussion who had resolved for themselves the objectification versus alienation dilemma thus: "I don't mind at all for the world to see my underwear, pink, white or whatever. There is nothing here to be ashamed of and hopefully it may help someone else." Another list member admitted that she had adopted a "Publish and be damned!" attitude after a painful struggle with the anguish of exposing herself by becoming a participant in an online group. This person valued her group experience highly and believed that the group had "a lot to offer" to others through our research.

Participants like this were not simply ready to lend themselves for observation, they were responding critically to the procedures of our research and at some points worked to influence its course. For example, two list members engaged in private correspondence with us offering their views on what research questions

would be the most meaningful to the list membership. Thanks to their involvement, we were able to better tune our questions to the list and introduce additional research directions. Here for example is a new research goal suggested by one participant:

One thing I wondered about as a possible end-product of research like yours was making a case for funding for Internet access for many disabled people, shut-ins, etc. Pie-in-the-sky vision, of course, but if it could be shown that people used less medical care and fewer ER visits and saved gobs of money by having the support and info from the Net, who knows what might happen?

On the basis of these interactions with our so-called subjects, we rediscovered the fact, long discussed in relation to clinical research, that the antithesis of alienation is not informed consent. It is the subjects' active involvement in the research project. For example, in a powerful article on the theme of medical experimentation written in 1969, Hans Jonas argued that for the subject to rise above the proverbial "guinea pig" status in the experiment, voluntary submission to being used is not enough:

Mere 'consent' (mostly amounting to no more than permission) does not right this reification. The 'wrong' of it can only be made 'right' by such authentic identification with the cause that it is the subject's as well as the researcher's cause—whereby his role in its service is not just permitted by him, but *willed*. That sovereign will of his which embraces the end as his own restores his personhood in the otherwise depersonalizing context. (Jonas 1969: 236)

Such a collaborative model (see Feenberg, 1995: 115–120) of doing Internet research, taking account of "participant interests" (see Feenberg, 1995: 105–109) in both the objectives and the process of the study, is more feasible than in any other research context due to the dialogical affordances of the medium.

This approach also suggests that the issues of confidentiality, security, and privacy in the process of collecting, keeping and reporting the data need to be discussed with the group under study. No one best solution can be prescribed as different groups will be supported by different technical configurations which will inevitably raise different concerns, not to mention the different ideas subjects may have about what it means to secure confidentiality.

True involvement of research subjects presupposes open-mindedness and methodological flexibility on the part of the researchers. Subjects did not come aboard simply to refine the language of our questions to them.

They reached toward the very core of our project. A new paradox emerges in this case. The more open and responsive we would like to be to the suggestions coming from the populations we study, the less methodologically and ethically prepared we would seem to our scholarly reviewers and ethics review committees both of which require a clear set of research questions and procedures to be planned *before* we have entered the field. The way the granting and ethics review procedures work now implies objectification/alienation of subjects, as researchers are required to know exactly what they will be doing in the field and *to* subjects before they ever get the chance to encounter them. This forecloses involvement. It is a typical example of how an administrative procedure reifies a particular relationship between researcher and subjects.

Of course we are not advocating pure improvisation. The scenario in the ethics of research on online communities that emerges from our analysis implies the necessity of more stages and iterations in the elaboration of the research design than are usual in off-line research. An ethical approach to online research is practically achievable through a process of preliminary engagement with the group and/or involvement of group members in the planning and designing of the study. This is strongly supported by the medium, and considerably hampered by the prevalent procedures for approving and financing social research which require the researchers, as our reviewers put it, to "have a clear plan in place . . ." This iterative process should itself become a legitimate component of researchers' plans. Hence, a need for new ethical and administrative canons providing more space for methodological creativity of researchers and subjects.

Non-alienation: a norm – with exceptions

Many online communities are active in virtual public spaces anyone can peek in on at any time. This was true of the community we studied although its members seemed only dimly aware of their exposure. No doubt it was this openness to inspection which earlier researchers interpreted as an invitation to observation and analysis without concern for the consent of subjects. Yet the very fact that many members of online communities are only vaguely aware of the public nature of their exchanges suggests the need for caution. Their trust may be misplaced, but nevertheless it is not good for researchers to violate it without a compelling rationale.

There are other legal models on which we can draw for insight into this new situation. Similar issues arise

in relation to photography in a legally clarified context. Photographers have been documenting street life for a century and their efforts have played a recognized role in public discourse. Pictures of the poor and oppressed in particular have had an important impact on legislation and public policy. Using the argument of freedom of expression and public interest, photographers have defended their right to publish anything that appears in public. Yet individuals have prevailed in lawsuits aimed at protecting their image from exploitation by photographers.

By what right do individuals claim ownership of their own publicly displayed image? The strongest cases have to do with the right of individuals to compensation for the sale of their image or reparation for harm from being exposed to ridicule or retaliation. Increasingly magazines and newspapers have demanded that photographers obtain signed releases from anyone who can be recognized in a picture, especially if they might reasonably complain about their portrayal or the associations evoked by it. The line is still somewhat fuzzy, but it is clear now that individuals do retain a certain right over their image even when they are photographed in a public space.

Nevertheless, the ethical issue in online research differs from this case in two important respects. The subjects of street photography are not involved in the reproduction of their image for publication. The means of publication, cameras, are brought to the situation by the witness. In the case of the Internet, the subjects themselves construct the transcript of their own actions. The exploitation of that transcript requires no special technical intervention on the part of the exploiter. This suggests that courts will be unlikely to grant as much legal control over their online image to individuals as they have granted to photographic subjects. On the other hand, protecting subjects by masking their identity is far easier in online research than it is in photography.

Should researchers be influenced by these differences? Certainly there is an important distinction between violating ethical and legal norms. A newspaper may quote and attribute online comments without fear of legal consequence where a researcher might feel held to a higher standard of respect for their subjects, especially where simple procedures can protect them. This is a reasonable distinction. Yet, as noted above, certain kinds of research would be impossible without exploiting the naive self-publication of online participants. It would be absurd to deny researchers the right to study important public issues such as educational achievement or gender inequality routinely discussed by journalists on the basis of public evidence available to all.

The public too has rights, most importantly, the

rights to the means of self-understanding and self-reflection. This right yields to privacy rights in many contexts, e.g. doctor-patient relations, but not in all contexts, certainly not when individuals engage voluntarily in activities of public significance in openly accessible spaces, whether in the street or online. On the other hand, the very possibility of research depends on the good will of the populations studied. To needlessly alienate them by exploiting their online activities where consent and involvement might have been negotiated is not only disrespectful, but also destructive of the research enterprise. We therefore conclude that the right of non-alienation of online communities should be respected wherever possible, and on the basis of our experience we believe that to be easier than is sometimes supposed.

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