

How will new BPS guidelines for Internet-mediated research impact on qualitative research?

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Abstract

The Internet provides both opportunities and risks for psychologists conducting research. In April 2017, The British Psychological Society published ‘Ethics Guidelines for Internet-mediated Research’, structured around the four core ethical principles of: respect for the autonomy, privacy and dignity of individuals and communities; scientific integrity; social responsibility; and maximising benefits and minimising harm. This article maps out these new guidelines, specifically with qualitative research in mind. It concludes that some key ethical considerations must be taken into account when embarking on Internet-mediated research.

Keywords: Ethics; Internet; Social Media; Blogging; Consensus Methods.

Overview

A few years ago, when researching piracy of pornography, I was surprised to when I found my smiling face emblazoned on the home page of a website promoting remuneration for rightsholders in the Adult Entertainment Industry (see Brown, 2014). That I was smiling had nothing to do with my face being nestled between graphic images of naked women engaged in explicit sexual acts – what had happened was that I simply tweeted a hashtag which resulted in my tweet appearing on this website, complete with my profile picture; my now ever-so-slightly creepy-looking profile picture. I did not give my consent to appearing on this website. At the time, I was alarmed; genuinely mortified and taken aback. It got me thinking about ethics online, wondering if it was anything more than an oxymoron. It was pleasing then that in 2017, The British Psychological Society (BPS) published new guidelines for Internet-mediated research – one of them is obtaining valid consent. Qualitative research is given due attention in the publication and this short article is concerned with how the guidelines may come to influence both the methods used by, and topics investigated by qualitative researchers adhering to the guidelines.

A summary of the new guidelines

The 2017 publication ‘Ethics Guidelines for Internet-mediated Research’, put together by a working group formed in 2017, is structured around the four core ethical principles mapped out in the British Psychological Society’s Code of Human Research Ethics, most recently revised in 2009. These principles are: respect for the autonomy, privacy and dignity of individuals and communities; scientific integrity; social responsibility; and maximising benefits and minimising harm.

Internet-mediated research is noted as encompassing both quantitative and qualitative approaches which involves ‘the remote acquisition of data from or about human participants

using the internet and its associated technologies' (The British Psychological Society, 2017, p. 3). In terms of qualitative approaches, the guidelines mention both researcher-driven (or reactive) data collection methods such as online interviews, where standard protocols of informed consent (with associated reassurances of confidentiality, anonymity, etc.) remain, and those concerning unobtrusive (or non-reactive) collation of 'found text'. In such instances, with data gathered from sources such as social media and blogs, informed consent is impossible to obtain. Even having neatly broken things down into two categories (reactive and non-reactive), the guidelines explain simply that different types of Internet-mediated research will demand different ethical considerations. As with any research, there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Relatedly, normal principles of research with human participants apply to Internet-mediated research.

Focused around the four principles of The British Psychological Society's Code of Human Research Ethics (2014), the table below summarises the main ethical issues to consider with Internet-mediated research. The table provides a snapshot into some of the key considerations discussed in the publication, and is noticeably skewed towards the first principle; to provide respect for the autonomy, privacy and dignity of individuals and communities.

Table 1: BPS (2017) Main Ethical Issues Concerning Internet-Mediated Research, Reproduced

Principle	Considerations
Respect for the autonomy, privacy and dignity of individuals and communities	<p><i>Public/private distinction</i> – The extent to which potential data derived from online sources should be considered in the public or private domain;</p> <p><i>Confidentiality</i> – Levels of risk to the confidentiality of participants' data, and how to minimise and/or inform participants of these risks, particularly where they may potentially lead to harm;</p> <p><i>Copyright</i> – Copyright issues and data ownership, and when permission should be sought to use potential data sources;</p> <p><i>Valid consent</i> – How to implement robust, traceable valid consent procedures;</p> <p><i>Withdrawal</i> – How to implement robust procedures which allow participants to act on their rights to withdraw data;</p> <p><i>Debriefing</i> – How to implement robust procedures which maximise the likelihood of participants receiving appropriate debrief information.</p>
Scientific integrity	<p><i>Levels of control</i> – How reduced levels of control may impact on the scientific value of a study, and how best to maximise levels of control where appropriate.</p>
Social responsibility	<p><i>Disruption of social structures</i> – The extent to which proposed research study procedures and dissemination practices might disrupt/harm social groups.</p>
Maximising benefits and minimising harm	<p><i>Maximising benefits</i> – How each of the issues mentioned above might act to reduce the benefits of a piece of research, and the best procedures for maximising benefits;</p> <p><i>Minimising harm</i> – How each of the issues mentioned above might lead to potential harm, and the best procedures for minimising harm.</p>

Principle 1: Respect for the Autonomy, Privacy and Dignity of Individuals and Communities.

As would be expected, there is much to discuss in this principle, and non-reactive data (i.e. passively collected, such as data found on forums) pose greater challenges than reactive

modes of data collection, where participants interact with research materials (as in an online survey). It is explained, for instance, that unobtrusive collection of data online can result in being able to trace data back to individuals. In such instances, anonymity and confidentiality are compromised. As valid consent is also not collected, so-called ‘participants’ are also unable to withdraw. Given such violations of basic ethical principles, the question of when psychologists should ever rely upon such data collection practices takes centre stage. A clear answer is put forward – when participants would expect their data to be observed by strangers. Silverman (2016) considers websites to be highly transparent as anyone can access them and this observation highlights one of the principal benefits of drawing from data found on websites – *ecological validity* (see Willig, 2013).

Jowett (2015) explains that in Internet posts, people orient their contributions to a group of strangers, even when replying to a particular post. Or put another way, people are mindful that their contributions can be read by anyone. This is important from an ethical perspective, and the BPS (2013) have indeed previously explained that use of research data without valid consent may be acceptable when it is anticipated there is no expectation of privacy or where the value of research is thought to justify unsolicited observation. It is of course now ubiquitous for Twitter posts to appear on online news outlets (or on websites about pornography), without any permission sought.

This section on the principle of respect for the autonomy, privacy and dignity of individuals and communities, is comprehensive, anticipating numerous likely issues. Notably, it covers the now ubiquitous online survey, suggesting that a prominent ‘exit’ or ‘withdraw’ button on every page as good practice.

Principle 2: Scientific Integrity.

Researcher control is largely surrendered with Internet-mediated research, and this can impact on validity. An overlooked aspect of control is the simple fact that it is difficult or impossible to know who participated in a given online study (of any kind), resulting in compromised sampling. This observation of course plagues self-report methodology overall (how accurate is self-reported age?) but is more prominent in Internet-mediated research. With the lack of control evident when using online methods, perhaps researchers should question use of such methods when control is paramount; surrendering the likely conveniences of Internet-mediated research may be worthwhile when knowledge of gender, for instance, is critical to the research questions guiding a given study.

Principle 3: Social Responsibility.

Internet-mediated research poses great potential for causing harm. When the scientific value of research which involves intrusions from researchers in online spaces which may be thought of as private (see principle 1) though, it is noted that it may be more appropriate for researchers to participate online without making it clear their position as a researcher. To take the case of a forum, it may be better to passively, or non-reactively, collate data without interacting with others having made clear your intentions as a researcher; if the identity of a researcher was to be revealed, it could damage the reputation of a given forum, having allowed an outsider in to conduct research. Jowett (2015) notes that forums provide naturalistic material, and that they allow researchers to ‘capture conversations by ordinary people pertaining to specific issues without the researcher directing the discussion’ (p. 288). This naturally makes them appealing sources of data.

The scope for harm at least partially stems from the lack of control – it is simply not possible to know who you are interacting with online and how individuals might feel about

their words (and by implication thoughts and feelings) being shared amongst parties they did not expect to be shared with.

Principle 4: Maximising Benefits and Minimising Harm.

This section is quite direct, as compared to much of the earlier sections; it offers some very specific guidance on particular scenarios, including when it may be appropriate to name a website in a publication, and which groups may welcome their discussions being disseminated. In the case of traceable quotations, it has been noted that some researchers have engaged in paraphrasing, or combining quotations. This practice of course jars with typical qualitative research. An interesting similarity with Internet-mediated research and conventional qualitative research is that pseudonyms used online should be ‘treated with the same respect as a researcher would treat a person’s name’ (BPS, 2017, p. 19). Doing so can minimise harm, except in the case of anyone feeling that their words ought to be attributed to them. As the trend for research to be published open-access continues, this may become more commonplace in time.

Potential impact of Internet-mediated research on research methods and topics

In terms of methodology, the guidelines raise the question of whether particular research is in fact suitable for Internet-mediated research at all. The lack of control is central here.

Qualitative data is principally in text form, often transcribed from verbal methods of data collection such as interviews and focus groups. However, visual data are also qualitative data, and many people share visual information both of themselves and their environment on the Internet; such data is one of four types of visual data outlined by Flick (2007). From sharing selfies on Instagram or posting holiday snaps on Facebook, people are increasingly communicating visually. Rania, Migliorini, Reborra and Cardinali (2015) explain that ‘the cultural norms of society are increasingly visual with rapidly growing use of technology’ (p.

382) as we live in an increasingly visual world (Hadlington, 2015). One likely outcome of this is that people increasingly prefer information to be provided in a shorter timeframe (Carr, 2010). This has impacted on how information, including news, is circulated. Such changes inform Braun, Clarke and Gray's recent 2017 book 'Collecting Qualitative Data: A Practical Guide to Textual, Media and Virtual Techniques'. As human life becomes ever more digital, so too must qualitative methods.

Ethical implications of the use of visual approaches have been raised elsewhere (Reavey & Johnson, 2008), and the brief review above illustrates the potential for future qualitative research to rely more on visual data – it is widely shared online, and importantly, it is clear that people know that others will be viewing the images shared online (see principle 1). With this in mind, perhaps use of visual data will become more commonplace in the future.

Cyberpsychology is rising to prominence in UK, with institutions such as The University of Wolverhampton and Nottingham Trent University offering dedicated Cyberpsychology programmes. A new BPS section on Cyberpsychology is also currently under consideration. As we continue to commit more and more time on the Internet (access to the Internet is of course now a human right), it stands to reason that research ought to make sense of this trend. Research into online behaviours not only poses immediate societal benefit, by investigating cybercrimes such as digital piracy, but it provides a platform for multidisciplinary research, working with those with expertise in human-computer interaction, for example. In the case of digital piracy, an eclectic array of Internet-mediated research approaches are utilised; this includes research involving online interaction between researcher and participant (Sinclair & Tinson, 2017; Steinmetz & Tunnell, 2013). These two examples come from research in marketing and criminology, respectively, both of which overlap

significantly with psychology in their use of both theory and methodology – and in this case research topic.

A particularly timely topic which qualitative researchers would be well-positioned to explore is that of misinformation and conspiratorial thinking. At present, the field is dominated by quantitative work, often using contrived instrumentation. This field of investigation is also worthy of note as it clearly demonstrates a cohort of web-users who do not like their discussions being disseminated in academic publications – conspiracy theorists. A series of papers (Lewandowsky, Oberauer & Gignac, 2013; Lewandowsky, Cook, Oberauer & Marriott, 2013; Lewandowsky, Cook, Oberauer, Brophy, Lloyd & Marriott, 2015) charts conspiracy theorists' response to a publication (Lewandowsky, Oberauer & Gignac, 2013) further to complaints made to: 'The first author's university alleging misconduct; several freedom-of-information requests were submitted to the first author's university for emails and documents' (Lewandowsky, Cook, Oberauer & Marriott, 2013, p. 3). A retraction followed when follow-up research exposed blogs used for data analyses.

Publishing is slowly moving towards open-access models, with mainstream open-access likely to happen in Europe by 2020 (Khonami, 2016). To clarify, much qualitative data collected online which has been published will have been published in journals which laypersons will not currently have access to. Accordingly, the sort of backlash summarised below may be a sign of things to come in the future, should the general public be motivated to seek out academic research when it becomes freely available, only to discover that their words (no matter how well they have been disguised) are the subject of academic investigation, without their consent.

Conclusions

The rules of Internet-mediated research are clearly still being written, but Psychologists now have up-to-date guidelines to draw from. This is a good thing. Qualitative researchers must not risk tarnishing the reputation of psychology – the discipline is of course still very much associated with the so-called quantitative ‘replication crisis’ in the popular press.

Discussion of the ethical implications of Internet-mediated research is longstanding, with Evans, Elford, and Wiggins (2008), for instance, noting how information sourced online can be easily traced back to its original source using a search engine. The BPS (2017) have made suggestions on how to address this, by paraphrasing quotations, for instance. Yet at the same time, it has been explained that Internet-mediated research is potentially *more anonymous* than many other forms of data collection (Berg, 2009). In any case, the lack of control is a central cause of the many issues mapped out by the BPS in the recent publication under discussion in this article.

The publication under discussion notes that: ‘Advances in technology extend opportunities for psychological research’ (BPS, 2017, p.3). Indeed, Morison, Gibson, Wiggington and Crabb (2015) explain that technology now exists which allows researchers to carry out research that simply would not otherwise be possible; elsewhere it has been said that the Internet allows for nuanced data collection from large numbers of participants (Barbour, 2014, p. 199). Internet-mediated research then, is alluring; but as the new guidelines demonstrate, some key ethical considerations must be taken into account when embarking on Internet-mediated research. In the case of ‘high risk’ situations (those with high risk of harm), it is noted that researchers ought to consider if their research is in fact suited to Internet-mediated research at all.

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