

Public places – public activities? Methodological approaches and ethical dilemmas in research on computer- mediated communication contexts

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Introduction: civilisation processes of and on the Internet as context for ethical standpoints

The Internet as research arena for human interaction and meaning production is – similar to the medium and its activities themselves – still a pioneer field. As Christina Allen (1996, 177) suggests, 'The cyberspace experiences that can contribute to ethical wisdom are just now developing.' However, as more and more knowledge is produced by an ever growing group of researchers from diverse disciplines, it has become visible that the groups of people using the Internet as well as the medium itself has gone through big changes. Following these developments, the hegemonic discourse about the Net as technological phenomena has also changed.

The user group, which previously was heavily dominated by male, university educated, white, middle class, young north Americans is becoming more heterogeneous in relation to social categories like nationality, gender, education, ethnicity and age. Increasing diversity is further existent when it comes to what we use the Net for, and how often. Slowly the societal importance of the medium has grown and become intertwined with existing institutional infrastructure and organisations (Haythornthwaite 2001). Parallel to this, the Internet — as a 'virtual reality', an unfamiliar separate social sphere on the side of the established society, as described by politicians, the media as well as individual users

— is now gradually starting to lose some of its mysterious charisma as it is increasingly integrated into society and more commonly used.

Starting out as a 'lawless Wild West', the Net is gradually undergoing 'civilisation' processes, on many levels, by several groups of actors, including legislation (Mann and Stewart 2000). This also goes for using the net for research purposes. After a good decade with humanistic and social scientific studies on net-mediated contexts, the first phase of 'trying and failing' has established valuable knowledge not only in relation to the medium and its users, but parallel to this, on 'doing internet research' (the title of Steve Jones' book from 1999), methodological issues related to the research processes themselves. There has certainly been a movement from 'anything goes' to developing and negotiating an understanding of 'best practices', based on the experience from the growing number of studies carried out. This is further being institutionalised as we speak, where specific rules for the handling of different kinds of Internet-generated material is increasingly developed at ethical review boards and data protection institutions at local and national levels, as well as within research associations.¹

It is within this frame that I focus on the use of the Internet for conducting research on human behaviour, and how the experiences of users and researchers have generated discussions on ethical implications of diverse methodological approaches in doing Internet research. Moving into unexplored land and unknown landscapes for studying human interaction, researchers have been forced to rethink basic issues related to practical and ethical sides of collecting material, to be able develop and apply approaches that work for ourselves and our research goals and which may be ethically defensible in relation to our informants.

A particular challenge in these processes has been to define and establish a definition of the Internet as a context for the activities being studied, which is in particular rooted in the 'nature of the medium'. Compared to other mediated and non-mediated communication contexts, the Internet gives the possibility of large scale group communication through written text, with a low level of expression through the lack of editing instances, and where the interaction can be stored electronically (Aarseth 1994). Communication is further often publically accessible for all Internet users, allowing non-participating observers to listen in on a chat group or read a web-stored message archive for a discussion group. In that sense, Internet-mediated contexts have features similar to both traditional public discourse like newspapers, being broadcasted to a large audience, and at the same

time they consist of many activities and issues that traditionally have belonged to more private spheres and means of communication.

This hybridity has created new possibilities for groups and individuals to meet and communicate across geographical space relatively easily. For humanists and social scientists interested in studying communication processes or other social phenomena, a whole new field of study has developed, based on this new rich source of highly accessible material. The use of net-mediated interaction as research material has, however, raised important questions when it comes to how to methodologically approach this kind of material in ethically acceptable ways. In doing this, it has become apparent that the semi-public mediated contexts of the Internet challenge existing ethical guidelines in the sense that there are no easy answers as to what type of material they would seem to represent as compared to other mediated and non-mediated contexts. How we choose to define a certain type of activity as public or private in doing research on naturally occurring discourse is again crucial for central ethical issues such as the necessity of gaining informed consent from informants to be part of the research, and to what extent anonymising is necessary. Ethics and methodology are in this sense tightly interwoven with and have consequences for each other: a specific ethical standpoint will lay premises for methodological approaches, and choosing a certain way of finding answers to a research question will always imply an ethical perspective.

In this chapter, I discuss some of the central general ethical issues in doing online research, and how net-mediated contexts often fall in between the traditional division of public and private, making it necessary to find new definitions for what should be considered as public and private contexts on the Net. I also address some key corresponding methodological issues related to defining and accessing different kinds of net-generated material, and I overview some of the dilemmas raised by choosing one or the other solution to them.

General ethical guidelines: pointing in which directions?

'Ethics', as opposed to morals, refers to 'persons-in-culture. In relation to research, this points towards the obligation of the researcher to a group (her informants as well as the society) (Stanage 1995, in Thomas 1996: 108). In all countries and cultures, researchers are accountable to

a set of principles and laws of how to carry out projects in an ethically responsible way, whether formulated as a set of detailed rules, a set of general principles or both. In a Norwegian context, general guidelines for research ethics in the social sciences and the humanities are published and revised by the National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH). These guidelines are 'intended to help researchers and the research community to think about their ethical view and attitudes, become aware of conflicting norms, and become better able to reach well-founded decisions' (NESH 2001: 3).²

What do our general principles suggest in relation to research in the semi-public spheres of the Internet? Are they useful and applicable in their existing form, and in what directions do they point to central issues of the protection of persons involved in research on computer-mediated communication? Are new guidelines required on the basis of networked contexts? When taking a closer look at section B of the NESH guidelines, focusing on the protection of persons, we see that it starts out by stating that 'the point of departure for research must be fundamental respect for human dignity' (NESH, 2001: 7, pt 5). This is further formulated into three main principles that form the basis for the specified points in this section, aiming in particular at research in which individuals (those being researched) can be identified.

The research process must meet certain requirements to:

ensure freedom and self-determination (paragraphs 6, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14 and 19)

prevent harm and unreasonable strain (paragraphs 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 15, 17 and 18), &

safeguard private life and close relations (paragraphs 12, 13 and 14)' (ibid.: 8).

A central issue related to all of these principles and one of the main issues in protecting persons carrying out research, is the necessity of obtaining informed consent or informing about the research, and what this principle actually implies of responsibility for the researcher in relation to informants. In practice this means that before being involved in research projects persons should be asked and freely agree to participate in the study, on the basis of fully understood information about its purpose as well as how it will be carried out, and implied consequences for

the individual taking part. There are however some exceptions to this principle. According to the guidelines, 'observation of individuals and groups in public contexts – for instance in their capacities as holders of public posts – rarely requires informed consent, unless the research runs counter to the need of the individual for freedom and right to self-determination.' (ibid., 10) The document underlines that 'in the case of active participation, consent is normally required even when the research involves no risk.' (ibid.: 11, pt 8). Of particular interest in discussing ethical perspectives of doing research in net-mediated context is point 9, about the obligation to inform research subjects about the project, and what type of approaches and methods that can be considered as exceptions to the rule:

Observation in public spaces, in streets and squares, can normally be carried out without informing those concerned. However, the registration of behaviour using technical aids (camera, video, tape recorders etc) implies that the observed material can be stored, and thus possibly form the basis of a personal register. For purposes of such registration people must, as a rule, be informed that recordings are being made. (ibid.: 11).

This quote points directly towards a much debated core issue in doing, research - particularly 'passive' research - in computer-mediated contexts, rooted in the definition of the context itself. Is accessible information on the Internet per se a public space, allowing researchers to freely collect material for research purposes without notifying the participants? And what would be considered registration and storing of information in using participants' self produced written words? As to this question, our ethical guidance provides no clear answer. From 1999, however, a separate paragraph has been added to point 12 (The obligation to respect individuals' privacy and close relations) acknowledging that the distinction between the private and the public domain may be difficult to draw with regard to information concerning behaviour which is imparted and stored electronically, for instance on the Internet. Of particular importance is the advice given in using material drawn from such interaction, that 'researchers must give necessary consideration to the fact that **people's perceptions** of what is private and what is public communication may vary.' (ibid.: 13, my emphasis). In my opinion this is a critical addition, one which I will discuss and return to throughout the chapter for it emphasises paying attention to the users' own experience of the context with they interact within.

Public or private? Moving beyond spatial metaphors

For the Internet, as with the introduction of other new electronic media, metaphors are used to describe an initial phase prior to our gathering sufficient experience to define the medium on its own terms. Waskul and Douglas (1996) discuss the role of electronic media (mass media as well as communication tools as the telephone) in relation to how they have contributed in blurring the traditional boundaries between what is considered public and private, time and place. It is hardly the private home and the public town square (that the Internet space has been compared to by many researchers³ as physical places that divide what should be considered private and public anymore, but as much the social situation we are in.

In that sense, talking about the Internet as a 'public space' is highly metaphorical, since what is actually creating a 'space' on the Internet through text, graphics, photos, film and sound is the **social activity** taking place. Physically, we might be in our office, in front of the same computer screen, allowing us to perform and take part in a range of social activities with different numbers of participants involved, to whom we have different relations and who fulfill different functions in our lives. We amuse friends with jokes in private e-mails, flirt with strangers on a chat, or engage in political discussions on an e-mailing list. As Waskul and Douglas argue, the dichotomy of what should be labeled public and private 'domains' on the Internet, is an oversimplification in the sense that it refers to **accessibility**, not the **experience** of participants. Even in physical places defined as part of the public room, there is a difference between the intended publicity of activities taking place within it, and this is also problematised in the NESH guidelines as important to bear in mind. Defining a space from the 'outside', based on access, and from 'the inside', based on participants' experience of the social activity taking place are therefore two different positions that do not necessarily correspond.

When users participate in publically accessible activities on the Internet, the physical representation of observers is invisible, and the lack of visual and aural cues seems to lower the awareness towards a lurking audience (Sixsmith & Murray 2001). An important aspect of how to define a certain context in addition to its accessibility is thereby related to the **purpose** of the interacting group: are they **seeking** public visibility as a primary goal, or is it rather a consequence of the activity taking place (Eysenbach & Till 2001)? In creating a support group for victims of sexual violence, for

instance, a certain degree of publicity is actually necessary to attract and recruit potential participants to the list. Whether by doing this they gladly agree to allow their communication to be used, without consent, by researchers because it is accessible is, however, a different matter.

Most net-mediated group interactions **are** actually easily accessible, even if they are not directly available on the web (Ess et al. 2001). Signing up for a membership on a MUD-community, or a discussion list with restricted access, is often just a formality and requires no tests or interviews as for participants' intentions for joining the group. But it signals a **sense of privacy** to the outside world, drawing a boundary around the group of people that is considered belonging to the group as separate from the great mass of net-users. And it is exactly signals of this kind that Internet researchers need to pay close attention to and to interpret. This requires a high level of **context sensitivity** in researching internet-mediated interaction, encouraging a **participant perspective** as a point of departure in choosing research approaches rather than spatial metaphors in defining Internet communication activities.

Both according to my own experiences in researching electronic discussion contexts as well the experience of a wide variety of research projects carried out in recent years, learning about what kind of social activities that actually takes place in the mediated contexts is one of the most valuable lessons learned. Our research processes have given valuable knowledge and insight into 'the nature' of a number of interacting groups, teaching at least me that what I was dealing with was not 'like a public newspaper discussion', but a dynamic, living group of interacting human beings. Simultaneously, a number of 'worst practices' of research carried out, with high risk of potentially harming individuals and group, has contributed to increased attention towards participants' experiences of participating in computer-mediated communication contexts (see for instance discussions in King 1996, Eysenbach & Till 2001). A much cited research report in this sense, is Finn and Lavitt (1994, cited in Eysenbach and Till 2001), that used posted messages on a web-based support group for survivors of sexual abuse, without asking the group or individuals and publishing both the groups' original names, as well as dates and times for the messages sent. The reason given for not anonymising the group's name and other traceable information was that 'messages posted on a BBS (bulletin board system) are public information'. Even if participants' names were changed by the authors, attention

was drawn to a specific named group and its location, which violates a primary function of offering a supportive environment to people in a vulnerable position. As King (1996) points out, naming the group directly was unnecessary in relation to the study itself and added potential strain to the individuals participating in the group.

Two dimensions: group access and perceived privacy

In trying to combine the two dimensions of accessibility and participants' experiences Storm King (1996) suggests to separate between what he calls 'Group Accessibility' and 'Perceived Privacy' in choosing ethically sound research approaches in studying online groups and communities. The former refers to 'the degree with which the existence of and access to a particular internet forum or community is publicly available information', while the latter 'represents the degree to which group members perceive their messages to be private to that group' (ibid.: 126).

As there is no a one-to-one relationship between how accessible a group is and its social purpose, both these dimensions need to be considered. For instance, the usenet discussion network is a highly accessible and public domain, whereas the other end of the scale may be represented by a closed e-mail-based group with no publically available subscription address. In between, MUDs and MOOs,⁴ are good examples of domains where one often finds both open and restricted access areas. Concerning the level of perceived privacy, an academic open discussion group can serve as an example of a kind of context where the purpose of participating often is to make one's ideas known to as many people as possible. On the other end, we find groups meant to serve as a social support network for people sharing a difficult or marginalized situation.

The Internet has played a unique role in creating meeting places for groups of people with serious diseases, victims of violence or abuse, as well as sexual minorities. In particular, it is researchers studying health related phenomena using material from groups with socially sensitive topics who, on the basis of their own experiences, have visualised the ethical dilemmas in relation to these (see e.g., Sharf 1999, Sixsmith and Murray 2001, Eysenbach and Till 2001). Due to the sensitivity of the information shared, and according to traditional ethical norms, they are labelled 'handle with care', no matter how accessible the information is

to the researcher. According to Eysenbach and Till, users' responses to researchers sending out surveys online are often negative, as what they seek is a safe environment in which to share what is often very personal information. Making a group the focus for research can feel threatening to this safety, and it can lead to participants withdrawing from the group or stopping their active contribution. Potentially, this may ruin a supportive network, even if this was not what was intended (see e.g. Reid 1996). To avoid adding extra strain to such groups then demands careful considerations as to how to approach the group (and its individual members) in the research process.

Defining the context: conflicting issues of informed consent and privacy in participant observation

Who is the intended audience of an electronic communication - and does it include **you** as a researcher? (Ferri 1999, cited in Mann & Stewart 2000: 46).

As previously mentioned, ethics and methodology are closely tied to one other. Defining the context as more or less public or private, combined with research goals and preferred methods, are crucial issues for selecting a research approach. In using methods that involve active participation from informants, like interviewing and doing surveys, it should be quite clear that informed consent is required from participants, even if it is collected via e-mail or in online spaces.⁵ But what about observation and registration of naturally occurring discourse? It is not accidental that the study of online interaction contexts has given a 're-birth' of ethnography inspired approaches, studying net-communities as culture (Hine 2000). In many ways this arises because of the possibilities to observe and be a part of a group over a longer period of time, but without having to travel any further than to your nearest networked computer to reach your 'field' of study.

In doing material collection related to my own master's thesis, I experienced this accessibility as almost 'too good to be true' (Bromseth 2000). As an applied linguist, obtaining access to group communication processes that were already written, without having to go through all the work with transcribing as in researching oral communication seemed equally amazing. Few published research examples existed in

making methodological decisions, and I determined, after thorough discussions with my advisor, that obtaining consent for observing the groups was not necessary. Since both the discussion groups I studied were a) technically organised as electronic mailing lists, with an additional public message archive on the web, and were b) discussing issues related to traditional public debate (radical politics on one hand and the general practise of medicine on the other), I ended up characterizing them as part of the public domain, 'similar to a newspaper discussion'.

Further, it was not my goal to focus on individuals and their stories as such, but on how participants who were situated in a specific context then discursively constructed a discussion culture. I was however interacting directly with the groups and its administrators, as I also used an online distributed questionnaire as well as interviewing the list administrators face-to-face. The survey was distributed to the list members private e-mail addresses after securing consent from the administrators, along with a short presentation of the project and a statement securing full anonymisation of the participants and the groups' names. What I didn't tell them directly though, even if they knew I was conducting research in relation to the groups, was firstly about my **observation role** as a researcher in subscribing to the lists, and secondly that in addition to questionnaires and interviews, I intended to use **direct quotes** from postings as part of the material.

Even if I had categorized them as public activity, I had a growing feeling of discomfort for not having asked for consent to use their words as part of my thesis as I got to know the group context better and better each day. At that point, however, after conducting questionnaires and interviews, I felt it was too late to ask for consent as my study was heading towards an end. How awkward would it look to ask for their consent to observe the group when I had already been doing it for over a year, and secondly; what if they said no?

The uncomfortable feeling reached a threshold at the time when the thesis was finished and interviews with me about its results were to be published in both a medical journal and a radical newspaper, being sure to reach many of the participants in each group. What would happen now – would I receive furious responses from participants, feeling betrayed and used?

As a matter of fact, I didn't, and nor did such responses arise when I discussed my results on one of the lists with the group members after the interviews were published. Looking back, this wasn't just sheer luck, but related to my **experienced knowledge** about the group con-

texts; both had a charter and an aim of operating as part of the public room, as well as in practise, communicating to and with institutions outside of the groups in different ways. Their publicity was addressed explicitly and discussed as part of the group interaction, on the Doctors' List often as a reminder from the list administrator to the group though, to be careful with distributing patient recognisable information. Additionally, many members of the political list, the list administrator in particular, related strongly to the discourse of the Internet as 'a public place where all information is free and belongs to everyone' (see Bromseth 2001 for illustrations). In sum then, it was the lists' technical organisation, their subjects as well as how they would refer to themselves as public fora that in the end made me able to complete the study as it was, and to feel able to legitimize the approach I had chosen.

My point is that most of this knowledge was generated **as I observed**, making it difficult to draw a line for when my preliminary browsing actually became focused research, and in reaching this point, making it difficult to ask for consent as I felt I had already passed that line. In making my full research intentions explicit to the group members from the start I would have avoided this situation as they would either have accepted or rejected my reasons for being present, and I wouldn't have had to feel like a lurking thief with indecent motives.

Like a public town square?

What was it with these specific contexts that made me feel so uncomfortable about not asking the groups for consent to observe and to quote their words, in spite of the public character of these online fora? Looking retrospectively at my own process, as well as relating to other researchers' experiences and points of view, I will list and reflect upon some of the key issues related to doing qualitative research of net-mediated group interaction⁶. How do the mediated contexts they take place within differ from conducting observation studies in a public town square, and what dilemmas arise?

1) Validity: What does qualitative research of human group interaction in context require to be considered credible and what would this in turn imply for informants' privacy?

An important element in doing a qualitatively oriented case study of communication patterns in specific groups like the two I studied means that

the **context** in which interaction takes place is crucial to be able to **interpret the meaning** of the utterances/text that is produced. Using a discourse analytical approach as I did, looking at how cultural codes for discussion were created in the groups, would actually be meaningless without contextualizing, as linguistic choices and their functions within a particular social-cultural context are closely related (Crawford 1995). For the interpretations and analysis to be convincing then, it was in my case necessary to include relevant information about the subject of the list, the background for their origin, characteristics of the groups of participants, organisational structure as well as how participants were related to one another outside the discussion list itself. The members on my lists consisted of people from a Norwegian, largely one-national culture, in addition to representing a professional local culture and a small political community, as compared to an 'online community' only, with participants from many cultures and countries whose only meeting point would be on the net. Within a small national culture such as the Norwegian one, there is a clear maximum limit as to how many active discussion lists for each subject that actually can exist parallel to each other, and the number of general practising doctors and radicals is also small. So even if I changed the names of the groups as well as of individual participants, the risk for identification of both were high.

2) **Anonymising:** can quotes be traced back to individuals?

Not only because of the small cultural contexts would identification be possible, but additionally, when the messages are actually stored electronically on the web as in these contexts, the information used as basis for interpreting was available even after finishing the study. As the list administrator of the Doctor's List in a private e-mail commented to me after reading the ethical reflections in the thesis I had sent him, agreeing with me that consent should have been obtained amongst others because: '... the anonymisation is illusory. **Anyone could identify all the involved persons by using the message archives**' (private e-mail, my underlining). As Eysenbach and Till (2001) also point out, in using new search engines, writing in excerpts from a message can be enough to trace down the group from where it came as well as the specific message itself, if the group postings are available on the web. In contexts where participants are required to use their **real full names**, as was the case with the lists that I studied, a simple search would reveal the author of a quoted message directly.⁷ This leads me to my next consideration.

3) The use of verbatim quotes, and ownership: whose words are they anyway?

The issue of using direct quotes of participants in the research report is complex and with conflicting aspects, many of which is highly related to the researched electronic group context. Who do the written words of participants in a specific group 'belong' to – the individual participant, the group only – or 'everyone', and does everyone include the re-use of those words for research purposes without consent? As Stine Gotved (1999) points out in her ethical considerations related to her study of a usenet group, discussing the literature of Tolkien, she could easily have defended not asking for consent to quote from the group, in that the group was situated in the most public sphere of the net. Gotved's decision to be open about her research purposes was in particular driven by her 'sensing a private atmosphere in the newsgroup that made me doubt the definition of it as a freely accessible and observable room' (ibid.: 66, my translation). Using a theoretical concept from Lofland (1998) Gotved offers a unique description of the context as a local third sphere that lies between the public and the private. She also argues that there is a difference between sending a message to a group of peers, in spite of public accessibility, and the 'psychological situation of being interpreted by persons with other purposes than the group itself' (ibid, 66, my translation).

Beyond actual privacy or publicity there is something we can conceptualise as the participants'and groups' **perceived** privacy (as also pointed out by King 1996). Most research experiences report that the intended audience of a message is not the big mass of unknown readers, but the persons considered to be belonging to the group. In oral group communication, the boundaries and positions in a group are more easily defined. If there are eavesdroppers outside of the group that are not really part of it, but are potentially listening in, the awareness of this is of another character as we can actually see it and adjust to it. We are not usually speaking to them as a primary audience however, but to the ones we consider being part of the group (see Clark 1996).

In my study, in spite of an awareness of being part of the public domain, postings were often adressed as private messages to the group community, either in general ('dear colleagues on the Doctor's List') or to named persons. The list administrators, of course, seemed to have the highest awareness of their public character. Through their positions

they were technically responsible for running the lists daily and had access to who and how many that actually read the groups' interaction through the message archives. The administrator for the Doctor's List expressed in his interview with me that the members' lack of awareness of the group's publicity was his deepest concern, as exposing patient sensitive information potentially could do great harm if they were recognised by patients. Several incidents on this particular list indicate that although the nature of the list was public and everyone knew it, some members simultaneously perceived the list as private. On several occasions members expressed surprise when people outside the group responded to what they had written. One of the members even lost her job partly as a consequence of discussing work related issues on the list.⁸

The diverse attitudes of recontextualizing a group's interaction, and individuals' messages, in spite of being publically published through archives, was further demonstrated to me while participating on a feminist discussion list, where one of the male subscribers forwarded a number of messages from this list to a different list I was using for my study, a radical political list. His forward was strongly reprimanded by the authors of the messages as well as the group. The feminist list' administrators posted a message to the radical forum, stating that 'such an approach feels uncomfortable and intrusive to the members of the feminist list' (my translation), arguing that the messages were written to this specific audience and not to the group context of the other list and that consent to re-use them from the authors should have been obtained. The incident raised a discussion on the feminist list about the potential consequences of its publicity, and ended up removing its message archive to avoid similar situations in the future.

These examples illustrate that in many, arguably even most, cases, messages posted are intended for a specific audience despite the absence of explicit awareness or discussion of this norm. Consent should therefore be obtained to quote to both allow participants to choose whether to be quoted or not, and further, in order to choose if they would want their privacy protected through anonymizing, as in most cases, or if there is a context where being credited for their words is an issue. The latter points towards people who write with publicity as a primary goal for their messages, as in certain academic contexts, or written art, where the subject of copyright would be an issue (Sixsmith & Murray 2001).

4) Research purpose: is direct quoting necessary, and can consent to quote be skipped?

There is always a choice of using direct quotes or not. Some researchers argue that reformulating a postings' content should be the main rule in certain contexts, to avoid the problems of making potentially identifiable information public and thereby protecting participants from being identified (e.g. King 1996). This is however a topic that is highly related to research purpose and academic discipline, as pointed out by Susan Herring (1996). In studying language use, as I do, an analysis of interaction patterns without showing the linguistic analytical basis for the interpretations would destroy the validity of the study, as it would be impossible for others to question the relations between the data source and the researcher's interpretations of them. An interesting question in relating to our general ethical guidelines in this case as I see it, is how the use of direct quotes is to be categorized in terms of 'registering using technical aids'. Peoples' written words, as opposed spoken ones, are already materialised and there is no need for using a tape recorder to collect them and further transcribe the recordings. In that sense, defining a text-based context on the basis of comparing them with other technical aids recording oral and visual behaviour can turn out as a sidetrack in the debate about whether informants should be informed or not when quotes are used directly. More important questions are in my view how utterances are used, for what purpose and if this would be in conflict with informants' right to privacy and self determination.

Susan Herring (1996) contextualizes this discussion by comparing it to the introduction of the tape recorder as a technical aid in doing research on communication in the early 1960s, that set off a similar ethical debate in research communities. Arguing from a positivist position, she claims that studies legitimately not obtaining consent to quote include: 1) quantitative-oriented studies with low risk of identifying informants and 2) studies that require the use of exact and unaltered naturally occurring discourse. Herring furthers this criteria by including studies with a critical aim, done within publically accessible contexts which she argues justifies the use of direct quotes as well as names of the group itself. In conceptualising 'publically accessible' Herring distinguishes between the groups that are directly accessible on the web and those who require subscription or passwords to access their discourses. Referring to her own previous studies and of one group in particular, a long-term study

using observation and linguistic analysis in list serves with public archives similar to my own, she reasons that the groups have chosen to be public themselves. If the aim of the research is to criticise certain practices within a group, it should be possible for others to access it to see for themselves if they agree with the interpretations or not.

Comparing Herring's stance to my own research experiences, where I am obviously highly critical towards my own choice of not obtaining consent to quote, it might be obvious that I strongly disagree with Herring's arguments as well as the premises and reasoning behind them. Firstly, using a positivist paradigm of research is not in itself a legitimate justification. The positivist tradition might hold that the researcher risks validity by notifying a group that it is being observed. Regardless, the point is not only the validity of the study, but the larger picture of purpose and context of research.

Secondly, related to my own research experiences, in researching a context with a relatively stable group of participants over a long period of time, operating with their own identifiable names, and communicating through written stored text, has little in common with the public town square scenario, which seems to be the dominant metaphor for Herring's justifications. The gradually appearing knowledge about participants' feelings of privacy and notions of participating in a dialogic group-communication rather than speaking to the public mass of net-users, should then rather constitute an important part of the ground for ethical considerations. I agree, however, that certain critical studies can be defended without informing participants, but rarely without anonymising their identity. Validity can hardly be a reason not to anonymize, as by the time the study is published, the discourse can have changed completely. Group communication, either mediated or non-mediated, are not static social entities, but dynamic and changing. By the time a study is published, the picture can be quite different than it was at the time of the study – old participants have left, new have been added. Even if lists have archives from years back, I cannot see how the principle of protecting privacy can be overruled by the principle of validity here. It should be more than enough to state validity in using quotes as an interpretive unit.

Another type of context quite different from the kinds of asynchronous discussion groups that I have mostly been referring to so far, that poses other types of challenges and questions, is that of synchronous

communication forms like chat rooms, MUDs and MOOs. As Malin Sveningsson (2001) reports from her study of a Swedish chatroom, she chose to not obtain consent because the participants already were disguised using pseudonyms, but most importantly because of her focus on linguistic form. If she was to ask participants for consent as she was observing, the intrusion would have destroyed the natural interaction pattern she intended to study in its entirety. As the pace of the communication is fast, and the group of participants changes continuously, this would have been all she would have time to do.

5) Risks and potential harm of identifying participants and group: how do participants present themselves and how stable is the group?

The last point I will mention as particularly relevant in relation to context and obtaining consent refers to the above-mentioned issue of participants' self presentation, along with the stability of group members over a certain period of time. In relation to these two dimensions, my groups could be seen as representing a combination of these factors that would make them vulnerable in two senses. Firstly, as the participants were obliged to present themselves with their real full names when sending messages, the risk of being directly identified through context information, a specific style or through search engines was high. This would be different in the chat context that Sveningsson describes, where participants can choose to use a nickname different from their real name and are because of that less easy recognisable even if the nicknames were published.⁹ Secondly, my groups represented relatively **stable communities** in the sense that even if their population changed during the two year period I studied them, a considerable number of users were present throughout the study.

Identifying a community as a social unit, either through not anonymising it in the first place, or by providing recognisable or traceable information about it, can then not only affect the **individuals** taking part, but the **whole group** as a community. Potential negative consequences of this are reported in several studies of online communities like discussion groups or synchronously organised social networks as MUDs and MOOs. For vulnerable groups with a supportive function, such as Elizabeth Reid (1996) writes about, where users of a group for survivors of sexual abuse were interviewed as part of her study of MUD-communities, just the fact that attention is drawn towards the group can be enough to make the environment lose its intended supportive func-

tion. In her study, several of the individual participants asked to be quoted directly and some even uttering a wish for being identified by their full name. She chose not to do this however, something she was relieved about afterwards when she received considerable attention for the study, as well as requests from researchers and others to be put in touch with the group through her. This experience illustrates that in net-mediated contexts, there is also a question of 'who knows best' how to make decisions about what to reveal of information, both to protect an individual from doing unintended harm to themselves, and to others. This is discussed in the NESH guidelines, as informants might not be able to see the effect of their actions as the researcher does, and this then comes into question when not only an individual's privacy is at stake, but also other individuals that are socially related to the studied individual (ibid, 30). Also, as research results are even more accessible than before because of the possibilities of publishing online, which is used quite commonly by internet researchers, the risks of identification have increased in general, calling for utterly cautiousness in protecting informants.

Defining a context and its ethical implication for researching net-mediated group communication on the basis of group access and perceived privacy, as King (1996) suggests, are useful startingpoints. However, I find them too static in the sense that they do not consider research purpose and the issue of quoting, as well as cultural and relational characteristics of the interacting group. It is the importance of this contextual information which I have tried to stress in my reflections above. The work of improving existing ethical research guidelines and making new, in particular interdisciplinary, medium-specific guidelines aimed towards an international research community (as the Association of Internet Researchers are compiling) needs to be 'context sensitive' and flexible. To do so also requires incorporating the variation of researchers' disciplinary backgrounds as well as the cultural situatedness of the studied group (also pointed out by Ess et al. 2001). In this way, bringing all our experience with researching diverse computer-mediated contexts in different ways to the table, and taking them into consideration, is of a great importance.

How would the different aspects of defining a context, as mentioned so far, be useful in planning a research design for collecting new material? Using my own process as a point of departure and illustration, I will now move on to look at aspects and dilemmas that arise in plan-

ning a research approach when it comes to whether and how to obtain consent to study groups of a more private character.

Moving from the public to the 'private' – changing research position

Finding out about own ethical standpoint **during** the research process in the previous research I conducted made me highly conscious about ethical implications of methodological choices in researching further discussion contexts. As I wanted to move on to look at discussion groups that had predominantly female participants, I discovered that they were a) often organised as restricted access groups outside the web, as e-mail distribution lists without public archives, and, b) often centred around topics of a more private character. Focusing on the constructions of gender and sexuality, I found two groups in relation to which I wanted to carry out research¹⁰. One of the groups targeted to women who want to become pregnant, organised as a web-based, publically accessible group with message archives; and one was a group for lesbian and bisexual women, organised as a restricted access e-mail distribution list with no public archives.

How can these specific contexts be defined as to whether or not it is necessary to obtain consent and on what grounds? In addition, what implications would different ethical choices have for my own research position and approaches? Obviously, most professionally trained and practising researchers would agree that the restricted access group for lesbians and bisexuals would require informed consent, both on the basis of access, not being situated in the 'public domain' of the Internet, and also because the participants would be considered a vulnerable group of people, belonging to a sexual minority. But what about the web-based group for women who were trying to become pregnant?

As I have illustrated throughout the chapter, it would be possible for me to choose and to legitimise several strategies, each rationalized and justified with a different sets of arguments. As I try to categorize what separates these positions, there seem to be two main paths of reasoning, related to who is more responsible for individuals' choices of revealing personal information and putting their privacy at risk: the individual herself, who freely participate in a publically accessible forum **or** the researcher who intend to use this information for other purposes than it was meant?

The answers to these questions can lead the researcher along distinctly divergent paths. For example, Susan Herring (1996) (and partly Mann and Stewart, 2000), would argue that as this group has chosen to organise themselves in the public part of the internet, consent would not be required to observe and quote their discourse. Herring thereby leaves the main responsibility to the individual and to groups to protect themselves from harm; groups can organise themselves privately should they wish to do so (Herring 1996: 166).

On the other hand, other researchers (e.g. Sharf 1999, King 1996, Thomas 1996), as well as the NESH guidelines, lay weight on the researcher's clear ethical responsibility in the process, to consider the risks involved, based on all information available at the time¹¹. Particularly central to this evaluation, both according to NESH and the researchers of health related issues, is the sensitivity of the topic and the nature of the group discussion. This is specified in the NESH guidelines as 'questions concerning sickness and health, political and religious views and sexual orientation' (2001: 13).

Let me review the complicating ethical factors in a seemingly simple example, using the pregnancy group. Having difficulties in becoming pregnant is definitely a health related issue. Even if such difficulties do not necessarily represent a 'stigmatised group in society', it can certainly be experienced as a strainful situation for some either over a shorter period of time, or for others, over a period of many years. In applying the list of contextual considerations I argued for above, my approach would still be qualitative, including recognizable context information about the list, and this list is also one-national in a small country. Full confidentiality can not be secured as I intend to use verbatim quotes, which can be traced through search engines (a factor that in itself would require informed consent following Eysenbach and Tills' considerations (2001)). Contrary to the makeup of lists I have used previously, not all participants are directly identifiable, as all participants use nicknames in the discussions. There are, however, a considerable number of participants that have composed presentations of themselves on the website, or have made their e-mail addresses known, reachable just by clicking their online names. As for the stability of the group as a community, it certainly exhibits features we have come to recognise as characteristic of online communities, with a central core of participants having been present for years, while another part of the group consists of women participating for a shorter period of time and is thus more transient.

Striving to minimize the risk of violating privacy and causing harm, the sum of all these factors about the group and the participants, combined with my research approach, on one hand, would indicate that I should obtain consent to study the group. On the other hand, the group has chosen to be part of the public domain, and could have organized themselves more privately. But for what reasons, and who chose the organisational form? There are obvious advantages of being situated as a web-based group, as it is easy to find, easy to use and provides links to other resources all in one place. Other participants' experiences which might be helpful are stored in the archives for new members to browse. Moreover, organized as a loosely connected temporary social network, the group might not be stable enough to act in a co-ordinated group fashion to change the organisational choices made by the initiator. Why must they choose a domain we researchers define as private, just to help us determine the boundaries to keep us out?

From easy-access Mecca to methodological hassle?

There are at least four obvious main issues in preparing a functional research design that will be affected by choosing to obtain informed consent or not: 1) How will the research purpose be affected in informing group members? 2) What research strategies would be possible? 3) How and can informants' privacy be protected and 4) What effects on the group as a social unit can occur?

The choice of **not** informing the group has some advantages related to the research process itself. Firstly, in avoiding 'the observer's paradox', and thereby not affecting the group communication in its natural environment, and secondly in not disturbing the interacting group and its social purpose. The main ethical consideration in not informing about the ongoing research is primarily related to the potential consequences of harming individuals or groups **after** the study is done, in publishing the results from it.

Deciding that obtaining informed consent **is** necessary, the implications are to a larger extent related to the **process of collecting the material**. Firstly, it will naturally raise an awareness and have some sort of effect on the studied discourse in itself. As Sixsmith and Murray (2001) exemplifies, it can for instance result in central participants withdrawing from the group, or even removing what they have previously written from the message archives, which would severely affect the basis for interpreting the material.

Secondly, in using interacting groups as focus for research, as compared to doing interviews with single individuals, there is the potential of doing harm to the social function of the group itself. This is reported by both King (1996) as well as Eysenbach and Till (2001). Referring in particular to health related discussion lists, requests from researchers seem to be increasing in frequency on particular topics, and some groups considered these to be intruding on the group's purpose and were therefore unwanted. **How** to inform and ask for consent in a certain group context without intruding unnecessarily is therefore an important matter. It is connected to both the purpose of the group and group norms as well as to its technical organisation. Eysenbach and Till (*ibid.*) suggest two main strategies. The first aims at informing the group **in advance** of the study, which is described as more intrusive. The second implies that the participants whose postings are intended to be used in the research report are asked for permission **retrospectively**.

In preparing my own study, I have ended up with deciding on asking the groups for consent in both cases. Moving from a safe, non-intruding observer position from the outside, the methodological implications and dilemmas raised as a consequence of my ethical considerations have posed some challenges without any straight forward and simple solutions to them. There are some major differences between the way the groups are organized that have forced me to choose different approaches, related to what degree their users can be reached by me as a researcher. Firstly, getting in touch with the groups and the individual members, and securing that each member receive the information, is a lot easier when they are organised as an e-mail distribution list, wether this is done through a posting to the list itself, or by sending each member an individual e-mail.¹² By sending notifications on a regular basis, it is possible to secure that most of the list members would be informed of my presence, intentions and implied consequences for the participants. It also opens up for a potential dialogue with group members that Sharf (1999) had positive experiences with in her research of a discussion group for women suffering from breast cancer. This can further have a good effect when using additional methods requiring active participation, as Stine Gotved (1999) reports from her study of a newsgroup. She received an unusually high percentage of answers to her online distributed questionnaire. Reflecting on her choice to make herself and her research intentions visible, she credits the amount of answers partly to her interactions with the group on their premises, assuming that this made the project appear serious and credible.¹³

In informing the web-based group, though, there is no control as to how many of the participants that would receive my notifications of the study as only parts of the group are available per e-mail. To secure a considerable number, I have chosen to send messages to the list on a regular basis, but to avoid intruding too much as the group has a supportive function to a partly vulnerable group, I have additionally chosen to make the project known through the web-site's start-page. This further requires co-operation with the administrator of the site, an instance in the group that can be helpful to cooperate with in preparing the study as she would know the context better and have advice on how to proceed.

Secondly, I have decided to ask for consent to use direct quotes from individual participants as the research progresses. This may cause few practical problems in relation to the e-mail distribution list, as I have access to their e-mail addresses as they appear in the headings¹⁴. In the pregnancy-group though, a dilemma that arises is again my lack of control when it comes to being able to reach participants through e-mail to obtain consent to quote. As a consequence, I have chosen to solve this by only quoting directly when informed consent can be obtained. Because of their situatedness on the web, quotes can be traced back to the group and thereby reveal the identity of both the participant and the group itself. Agreeing with Eysenbach and Till, this is a fact that participants should be made aware of as a basis for deciding if they would accept to be quoted or not.

In deciding on how and why to obtaining consent for research purposes, it is important to acknowledge that using groups as a unit of study poses some challenges as to who should give their consent and what it is that they should then do. As Herring (1996) points out, getting every individual group member to agree on the presence of a researcher would in most cases be impossible. Asking the list administrator only would not be a satisfactory solution either, as this is only one member of the group who cannot speak for everyone concerning such issues. Eysenbach and Tills' reflections on this matter are interesting, when they suggest that informing the whole group in advance of the study would allow individuals that were opposed to it a chance to withdraw from the group, and then seek informed consent from quoted participants individually. Thinking of the one-national discussion group for lesbians and bisexuals in particular, I have given a lot of thought as to: Whose rights are most important in being present in the group, and who should withdraw: group members feeling uncomfortable or insecure

about my presence, and thereby losing an important supportive network, or me, as a researcher? There are no easy general answers to these questions. In my own case, I intend to ask the group themselves when it comes to the closed lesbian and bisexual group, as they seem to have a well-developed community mature enough to make a collective decision as to whether and how I might be present and what they think would be fair.

Obviously, there are several methodological challenges related to the ethical choice of obtaining consent to do research in a net-mediated group, as compared to observing silently from the shadow. But simultaneously, in interacting with them on their premises they might tell me and teach me other things that I wouldn't be included in if I was just listening, and thereby improve the quality of the research. And hopefully I can teach them something too, by stimulating to meta-reflections on their own participation in a specific mediated group context. These can be useful in further discussions on what these contexts are experienced 'as' by the people taking part in them. Only in 'engaging in creative ethical work', as Christina Allen encourages us to (1996: 177), including users reflecting **with** us, can we as researchers develop functional and ethically sound research strategies on the diverse mediated contexts of the Internet. It might be more of a 'hassle' and time demanding than choosing not to. But all considered, why should using the Net for researching human behaviour be any easier than other types of research contexts? In the end, if we don't listen to participants' points of view in this matter, it will only have 'a boomerang effect' on internet research as a field, influencing both the credibility of the results of our studies as well as affecting possibilities for future research (as also pointed out by King 1996). What group will open their doors for researchers if our reputation is frayed?

Conclusions

In this chapter I have tried to highlight the importance of context sensitivity in defining ethical implications when choosing research approaches in studying computer-mediated group interaction. Using both others' and my own experiences from research on electronic discussion lists, as well as the NESH' ethical guidelines for humanistic and social scientific research as a point of departure, I have in particular wanted to

shed light on questions related to informed consent in the ethical grey zones of doing participant observation of naturally occurring discourse.

Due to the diversity of the social activities mediated through the net, as well as how they are organized and who takes part in them, internet research must be context sensitive. Also, because of the interdisciplinarity characterising the field of internet studies, additional ethical guidelines must be sensitive to researchers' different purposes and approaches in using the net as a field of study. Our existing ethical guidelines already provides us with good tools related to the ground principles of protecting persons involved in research: Can the research harm individuals and groups or relations? Is the right to freedom and self determination at stake? **This** should be the point of departure in further developing medium-specific guidelines, not rigid definitions of 'public and private spaces'. Research ethics is not about avoiding 'being busted' for breaking the rules, as often seen in journalistic approach, but implies an obligation to protect informants (Thomas 1996).

A crucial issue to be able to do this in future human research of the social activities of the internet is precisely to **learn** from the experience and knowledge developed, in order to educate researchers and research institutions, users and the society in how to deal with the greater risks posed by new electronic media (Ess et al. 2001).¹⁵

There is a great need for good courses, raising ethical awareness and methodological approaches so that future researchers do not have to repeat our mistakes or re-invent the wheel. Our knowledge must further be passed on to and discussed with the institutions responsible for making decisions and giving advice to researchers in how to approach a project in an ethically sound manner. Most importantly, our ears must be open to users' definitions of participating in net-mediated groups – as theirs should be open to us – to engage in a dialogue rather than a monologue.

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Notes

¹ The young international research organisation the Association for Internet Researchers (AoIR), for instance, will vote on an ethical guideline for conducting research on the Internet at their yearly meeting in 2002.

² The guidelines are meant to be 'an aid for researchers themselves' (NESH: 4). Additionally, researchers are bound by specific laws concerning collecting, storing and use of data, and are obliged to obtain permission from the Data Inspectorate as to storing systematically collected personal information.

³ This metaphor is used by, amongst others, Garber et al. (1999; cited in Mann & Stewart 2000).

⁴ These abbreviations refer to Multi-User Domains and Multi-user domains, Object-Oriented; these are online environments and communities dominated by synchronous forms of communication.

⁵ However, how to actually obtain informed consent in interviews and surveys conducted online as to the legal requirements in different countries is a different matter. The usual criteria is that consent should be given as a handwritten signature on a paper document. Several internet researchers have obtained permission from their institutional data protection boards to use electronically obtained consent, arguing that the extra work in printing, signing and sending consent-forms would actually lower the percentage of participation to such a degree that it would ruin the study (Mann & Stewart 2000). Mann and Stewart pose several practical suggestions for how to proceed in such a process and outline the advantages and disadvantages of different strategies.

⁶ Several of these are also discussed by other researchers I refer to throughout this chapter, and represent useful resources as they angle the issue from different research disciplines and positions.

⁷ Helge Ridderstrøm (forthcoming) reports a similar experience in doing a qualitative study of youth web-pages, where the informants' age conflicted with making traceable information available in their interpretations without having consent from their parents (which again would be difficult if parents didn't approve of or knew about their childrens net-activities...).

⁸ As she had used herself and her work environment as an example in discussing a general topic related to organising primary health care in a small community, this was interpreted by some of her colleagues as 'making private information public'. The incident led to a large support campaign from the list community, as well as discussions in press on consequences of participating in public net-fora.

⁹ The identification of participants' nicknames and online identities without obtaining consent is however also a topic under much discussion, related to participants' experiences of identity online (Ess et al. 2001). Also, nicknames would still be recognisable by participants in the studied group.

¹⁰ The groups havenot not yet been asked to participate in my study, and I would emphasise that the information about the groups as it is shown is based on preliminary browsing over a short period of time, not collecting or storing any material in a systematic way. This can seem to be in conflict with my ethical standpoints as argued in this chapter. I am of the opinion however, that a limited period of preliminary browsing in the search for material should be allowed, and is to a certain degree also necessary to find out 'what is out there'. The problem arises, as I see it, when information is collected systematically and focused, for a specific purpose. As for this project, I am just in between these two phases, and in the work of preparing letters of introduction to the lists I have been faced with the methodological challenges posed by my ethical standpoints, that has required careful thought before moving on to interacting with the lists. It might seem unethical to use them as an example given the background of what I have said previously in the chapter. By the time the

chapter will be published, however, I will have asked the groups, and I have been as careful as possible of not revealing too much information about them here.

¹¹ I emphasise that this is not to say that Herring and Mann and Stewart do not consider ethical responsibility as important. There seems to be a disagreement however, as to what extent the researcher should be responsible for protecting informants when informants clearly put their own privacy at risk by participating in the most public domains of the Net.

¹² Most e-mail distribution lists programs make it possible to receive a full list of its subscribers by sending a simple command to the automated postmaster.

¹³ In this context, however, the negative responses to her 'intrusion' of the group discussions were focussed around the issue of receiving 'spam' – irrelevant, non-topic e-mails. In usenet contexts, the value of not receiving off-topic postings is an important part of the normative interaction culture.

¹⁴ In waiting too long to ask for consent though, there is a risk that the address is not longer in use (Eysenbach & Till 2001).

¹⁵ Dag Elgesem (1996) also discusses this issue thoroughly in relation to new electronic media in general, posing a set of general principles about how to minimise violating informants' privacy.

