



Internet Research Ethics: A CSCW Community Discussion

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ABSTRACT

Research ethics continues to be an important topic of conversation within the HCI and social computing communities, especially regarding the specific ethical challenges raised by internet research. Developing a shared understanding of ethical norms is complicated by the diverse disciplinary traditions, evolving technologies and methods, and multiple geographic and cultural settings of researchers in these communities. Drawing on experiences of the SIGCHI Research Ethics Committee as well as empirical work towards developing best ethical practices for internet research, this Special Interest Group will discuss current practices and challenges in studying people and data online, covering the full research life-cycle from the crafting of research ideas, through study design, data collection, analysis, and then dissemination. This conversation will benefit from diverse voices and perspectives to help us all learn from each other and critically engage with our research community's values and ethical commitments.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Social and professional topics;**

KEYWORDS

HCI, ethics, research ethics, research methods

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1 INTRODUCTION

Research ethics has received increased attention in recent years, becoming an important topic of conversation within the HCI and

social computing communities (e.g., [4, 7, 8]). While ACM has developed broad policies regarding human subjects research,¹ these guidelines do not fully address the diverse types of internet-based research methodologies that go beyond direct engagement with human subjects. For example, discussions about the risks associated with the use of public social media data have led researchers to question how users feel about their data being used for research [9, 11, 18] and whether potentially content quoted in papers might be re-identifiable [1], both issues that become more pronounced when studying marginalized or vulnerable communities [5, 13]. And because of the limitations and challenges of regulatory ethical review [6, 16], research communities often rely on shared understandings and education around these issues.

A 2016 CSCW paper uncovered the lack of clear norms around internet research ethics in our community [17]. However, coming to a shared understanding of ethical norms is particularly challenging due to the diverse disciplinary traditions of CSCW, evolving technologies and methods for collecting and analyzing data, and multiple geographic and cultural settings reflected within our community.

Since 2016, the SIGCHI Research Ethics Committee has advised SIGCHI conferences and communities on ethical issues that arise in the course of research. This CSCW SIG will build on questions raised during a panel at CSCW 2021 [7], which included questions regarding research conducted online, with online communities, or using online trace data. Some of those issues raised, also discussed at a 2022 CHI research ethics SIG [8], were:

- What special precautions should we take when researching vulnerable populations or stigmatized or minoritized groups or issues?
- What are best practices for research that uses data created by humans (e.g., social media posts) that does not constitute human subjects research under typical legal definitions? Are there risks in reporting direct quotes from public data or in creating an archive of content outside its original context? Are there ethical issues with researchers violating terms of service?
- How can researchers from a socially empowered culture do ethical research that involves members of a different, less socially empowered culture?
- What is the meaning of “consent,” and how should consent be obtained, from members of groups, cultures, or nations



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¹See “ACM Publications Policy on Research Involving Human Participants and Subjects”: <https://www.acm.org/publications/policies/research-involving-human-participants-and-subjects>

that, for historical reasons, now distrust researchers from mainstream or empowered groups? Who gives consent for whom - when the primary research participant is an adult? a child? a member of an individualist culture? a member of a collectivist culture?

- When should positionality statements be part of research publications and reviews, and can such statements be harmful as well as helpful?
- Should there be consent practices for online experiments conducted by platforms and/or where people are not informed about their participation? What are the proper ethical considerations for conducting and then debriefing from studies that involve deception?
- In light of increasing calls for greater transparency, data sharing, and open science within HCI, how do we balance this important value with privacy and research ethics for the humans and the communities represented in our data? How does this balance shift with different degrees of power between “researchers” and “researched”?
- How well do existing ethics guidelines help researchers think about the unintended consequences of their work, and in particular the ways that unintended consequences of research, design and technology tend to apply unequally? And are these the right guidelines and ways of thinking about research ethics for our community?

The organizers of this SIG include members of the SIGCHI Research Ethics Committee, as well as the NSF-funded PERVADE (Pervasive Data Ethics for Computational Research) project,² which is engaged in empirical work towards developing best ethical practices for big data research. The SIG will provide a space to discuss current practices and challenges in studying people and data online, covering the full research life-cycle from the crafting of research ideas and study designs to data collection to analysis and dissemination. This conversation will benefit from diverse voices and perspectives to help us all learn from each other and critically engage with our research community’s values and ethical commitments.

2 CONTENT AND STRUCTURE

This SIG draws in conversations from both this body of knowledge and from the broader community—for example, ethics-related workshops [14, 15], panels [2, 4, 7, 10], and previous SIGs [3, 8, 12] held at SIGCHI conferences over the past decade. In particular, this SIG follows up from the 2022 CHI SIG that the research ethics committee convened for the first time in part because it is critical to have more open and interactive discussions with the broader HCI community that involves a diversity of perspectives and stakeholders [8]. Drawing on these experiences, we will structure this SIG to be a forum for open and frank discussions of these emerging ethical challenges—as well as successes—around internet research practices within our community. Prior to the event, we will solicit issues and questions from community members which will allow us build upon those known in the community and those that might be emerging due to the evolving nature of things like online policies and technological capabilities. These contributions will be integrated into the SIG discussions and activities. Additionally, we

²<https://pervade.umd.edu/>

encourage attendees to share anonymous questions, thoughts, and examples of ethical issues they have personally faced, fostering a more inclusive dialogue.

To facilitate this discussion, organizers will provide some initial background, then poll attendees regarding the questions or topics that most interest them, then divide into small groups (15min). Each group discuss their selected topic and use a shared virtual document to identify core and related ethical issues, and propose guidance in the form of questions for researchers to ask themselves, guidelines to be incorporated into a wider code of ethics, or other approaches that help researchers navigate ethical questions in their research (30min). All attendees will then report out and identify key takeaways from across the groups (30min).

Further, in an attempt to cultivate ongoing discussion and maintain community following the conference, SIG participants will be asked how they would like to continue discussions post-SIG. Post-SIG community engagement will take place across the aforementioned platforms, and take into consideration the input from the participants while also sharing key outcomes of the SIG and provocations to encourage ongoing discussions.

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