Ethical considerations for internet research

There are no definitive sector-wide or country specific ethical guidelines for internet-based research due to changes in the scope and interest of research, rapid advancements in technology and the cross border potential of online research. However, a large number of the ethical considerations that apply to ‘real world’ research also apply to online research and sources are able to suggest a number of factors, which should be considered before undertaking internet-based research.

- ESRC Framework for Research Ethics advises that all internet research should be subject to full ethical review.

What is the venue for the research? What are the privacy expectations established by the venue?
- There are a huge number of different online venues, which could be used for research such as; home pages, weblogs, Google searches, email, listservs, chat rooms, MUDS (multi user dungeon), MOOs (MUD object orientated). Do the venues have a policy that establishes specific expectations about the limits of privacy? Can participants within the venue indicate that their exchanges are private for example moving to a private chat room? Is the venue considered a public space?

Who are the subjects/participants?
- The research design should be carefully considered, if it is vital to the design of the project that particular participant characteristics are identified (e.g. age or gender) then online research may not be the most appropriate method. Care should be taken to identify minors from any pool of research participants and remove them if necessary. It is well established that minors may share private information online without realising the consequences.

Informed consent
- Ideally all participants would provide informed consent before participating in a research experiment. For online research, it is important to establish when and how informed consent will be obtained e.g. email or postal confirmation. The research team must ensure that their contact details are available to all participants. Ensuring that the research team are able to swiftly answer questions and to enable withdrawal from the research at any point.

How far do legal requirements or ethical guidelines of the country implicated in the research apply?
- E.g. All citizens of the EU enjoy strong privacy rights established in the EU Data Protection Directive (1995) according to which all subjects must:
  - Unambiguously give consent for personal information to be gathered online;
  - Be given notice as to why data is being collected about them;
  - Be able to correct erroneous data;
  - Be able to opt out of data collection; and
  - Be protected from having their data transferred to countries with less stringent privacy protections.

If recruiting participants by email researchers need to be aware of and comply with current legislation regarding unsolicited ‘spam’ emails. (http://www.ico.gov.uk/for_the_public/topic_specific_guides/spam_emails.aspx)

Monitoring
- With all internet-based research, there is a lack of control. There is no way to monitor the impact that environmental factors may have on the behaviour or responses of participants.
Attention should always be paid to protect research participants from harm. Problems arise when considering how to measure the distress of a participant where there is not direct access.

**Anonymity, Reputation & Trust** – Individuals will often begin participating in the virtual world as anonymous avatars. However, ‘players’ will invest time and energy to developing the reputation and status of their avatars. Extremely popular avatars may be linked to individuals’ real life identities. Research, which potentially threatens their anonymity or reputation, must be carefully considered.

When looking at communications online it is important to consider what risks might arise if the communication became public. E.g. if a participant were discussing intimate topics, psychological or medical status, sexual orientation would publication result in shame or threats to material wellbeing e.g. job loss, physical harassment, refusal of insurance.

Researchers must make participants aware that it is almost impossible to guarantee absolute confidentiality with online data, as the researchers are not in control of the networks being used.

**Deception** - the most likely form of deception is ‘lurking’ on chat rooms or discussion groups where researchers will join the groups to use them as a data collection point. There must be clear and convincing arguments as to why deception is the best method of data collection and this should only be condoned is the research question can be fully justified.

**Does the benefit of the research outweigh the potential harm to the participants?**

**Sources:**


The Research Ethics Guidebook: A resource for social scientists. [www.ethicsguidebook.ac.uk](http://www.ethicsguidebook.ac.uk)