

# “Just Chatting”: Research Ethics and Cyberspace

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**Abstract:** *Research conducted through computer-mediated communication is challenging traditional definitions of what is ethical research. In this article the author examines the changing role of assent/consent, confidentiality, and participant observation in qualitative research conducted in cyberspace. She concludes that REBs (research ethic boards) might be becoming more conservative in their decisions at the very moment that Internet research requires more flexibility and broader ethical definitions.*

**Keywords:** *ethical guidelines; cyberspace; participant observation; ethical creep*

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The increasing amount of research currently conducted in cyberspace requires a reexamination and perhaps redefining of traditional ethical guidelines. This redefinition comes at a time when, according to Haggerty (2004) REBs (research ethics boards) are increasingly “following rules” in ways that might result in research being refused based on its violation of the rules regardless of whether it is judged to be ethical. Haggerty has argued that the REB in which he participated might be more concerned about equality (all proposals have the same set of “rules” applied) than about critically examining each proposal on a case-by-case basis. This “ethical creep,” which Haggerty defined as “a dual process whereby the regulatory structure of the ethics bureaucracy is expanding outward, colonizing new groups, practices and institutions, while at the same time intensifying the regulation of practices deemed to fall within its official ambit” (p. 392), narrows what kind of research can be done and has real implications for online researchers, whose primary space for gathering information is the Internet.

To both further understand Haggerty’s (2004) concept of ethical creep and examine the implications of ever tightening ethical rules in cyberspace, I turn to the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (TCPS, n.d.; henceforth the policy). The policy covers all research in Canada that is conducted by anyone affiliated with a university (including students and part-time lecturers), and ethical approval as outlined in the policy is required before any research involving human subjects can be undertaken. The Tri-Council is also the primary funding body for social research in Canada. The policy defines ethical norms as being “developed and refined within an ever-evolving societal context, elements of which include the need for research and the research community, moral imperatives and ethical principles and the law” (TCPS, n.d., Article i.4). The policy is intended to be an evolving document, and the guidelines are applied through REBs that are local and reflect the academic community at large.

Allan (1996) echoed this approach when he suggested that the best way to develop ethical guidelines that are workable for researchers is through open dialogue between researchers and participants. The policy also states that it is not comprehensive to every ethical situation and is intended “(a) to outline guiding principles and basic standards and (b) to identify major issues and policies of debate and consensus, which are essential to the development and implementation of coherent policies for research” (TCPS, n.d., i-3). The following analysis is intended as a contribution to the ongoing debates on how the policy is being interpreted

by REBs and other researchers, particularly how they relate to online research. Specifically, I will look at how the policy applies to cyberspace and explore how research policies will have to be adapted to allow research to happen in cyberspace.

The policy and equivalent statements in other jurisdictions outline in their mandates the need to balance society’s need for research with the protection of human research subjects’ rights and freedoms. Sveningsson (2004) elaborated nicely on this balance in her discussion of the Swedish Council for Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences (HSFR) when she wrote, “Research is important and necessary for society and its development, and existing knowledge must be elaborated and developed. HSFR calls this the ‘claim of research’ that may sometimes be measured against the claim for individual protection” (p. 48). In other words, ethical policy statements and guidelines try to balance the need to do research against the need to protect individual rights. The knowledge that is gained from the research must be worth the risk that the research might cause to the participants.

In my research the ethical dilemmas I have faced have been in applying the policy to the unique circumstances of doing research in cyberspace, where traditional ethical guidelines related to consent/assent and confidentiality are not automatically applicable. The areas that have resulted in ethical difficulties are all associated with the participant observation section of my research. Issues of consent, harm or potential harm, and confidentiality all become more difficult and murky when doing research online. However, these issues are some of the main ones in taking predominantly medical ethical guidelines and applying them to social research. The policy is designed to apply to all research involving humans and, as a result, errs on the side of caution in ensuring the protection of participants. Although asking a person questions or observing them in their daily lives does pose some ethical risks, they are not as serious as experimenting medically on a person’s body.

### **Ethical concerns related to consent, assent, and confidentiality**

Consent and assent guidelines are outlined by the policy. The guidelines clearly state that free and informed consent and assent must be given to interview a participant as part of a research project. However, in participant observation research, the definition of participant becomes problematic. The policy deals with participant observation research in a section titled “naturalistic observation.” The guidelines outline that “naturalistic observation that does not allow for the

identification of the subjects, and that is not staged, should normally be regarded as of minimal risk” (TCPS, n.d., Article 2.3). In other words, observation in a public place where individuals will not be identified or recorded in ways that could identify them still requires ethical approval but does not necessarily require consent from each person that is observed in that public place. The guidelines also suggest that particular attention should be paid as to how the observations are recorded and that recording should be done in such a way that the individuals would not be personally identified (TCPS, n.d.).

With the standards unclear on exactly when consent and assent forms are needed, observational research especially becomes problematic. Research where it is not possible to get consent forms (e.g., Adler & Adler’s 2002 discussion of attempting to research minors who are participating in behaviors of which their parents or legal guardians are unaware) is no longer ethical research and can no longer be conducted by a member of the university. Furthermore, because the policies are open for interpretation, other factors such as fear of litigation or a moral belief that something is wrong (as opposed to its being ethically wrong) might result in research that is ethical but morally questionable being rejected under the guise of ethical reviews. Since the Simon Fraser case in 1994, where a student was subpoenaed to break confidentiality and describe and identify in court actions and individuals he had observed (see Haggerty [2004] or Palys and Lowman [2000] for details), REBs are aware that promises of confidentiality and anonymity are not always possible. Fear of litigation and lengthy court proceedings might be influencing ethical decisions as much as ethical conduct.

There is a growing tension among the policy, the REBs, which are responsible for interpreting the policy, and the fear of litigation from the courts that universities and researchers face, which, I believe, is resulting in a slippage where concerns over legality and even morality are being addressed as ethical problems even if the ethics of the research are essentially sound. I also believe that morality (the social question of whether something is right or wrong) is being applied not only to whether research is ethical but in ways that question whether some topics should be researched at all. I will return to the question of morality once I have outlined my case study. The ethical considerations that developed out of my research into how adolescent girls “play” in cyberspace both allow for examination of the need to define ethical standards in the new medium of the Internet and illustrate some of the problems inherent in the ambiguity of the policy

and the increasingly restrictive interpretations for which this ambiguity allows.

The examples I will use in this paper are drawn from ethical questions that came out of my observing participants accessing the Internet. Issues of consent/assent, confidentiality, and “harm” or “potential harm” are well demonstrated in this case. Seemingly innocuous research, such as watching adolescent girls play online, for which I had no problems gaining ethical approval from the university’s REB, can become ethically ambiguous when ethical standards and policies become interpreted in the most restrictive ways.

### **The cyberspace example**

The policy is useful in unpacking the ethical dilemmas related to consent, assent, confidentiality, and harm in my work. However, consent and assent are most problematic in cyberspace. The participant observation section of my research involved observing my adolescent participants as they played on the Internet. The last open-ended question on my interview guide requested that the students “show me what they normally do for fun on the Internet.” I had consent from the participants’ parents (the consent forms included a statement concerning the participants’ demonstrating their online activity), assent from the participants, and approval to conduct my research from the REB at the university where I was currently working at the time of my research. However, I did not consider whether I needed consent or assent from the people with whom my participants interacted as part of their demonstrations of how they played on the Internet.

Two participants encountered and chatted with a number of people while online and said that communication was “mostly” how they played in cyberspace. It was not until I was presenting findings from my research as part of a conference paper that I was challenged on whether I had the right to use the content of the information that was part of these chats without seeking out the permission of the unknown online party. At this point I began to realize that I had pushed the boundaries of what has traditionally been considered ethical research because if these online individuals were considered research participants, I was observing them and reading their CMC (computer-mediated communications) responses without either consent, if they were of legal age, or consent from their parents and assent from them, if they were under 18. These online correspondents could be considered additional research participants, and no consent (or assent) forms had been signed. In fact, in many cases the online correspondents were unaware that I was observing the girls as they played.

To unpack the ethically ambiguous nature of these conversations, I need first to examine how ethics are being applied to cyberspace, how other researchers have solved the ethical dilemmas of online research, and how REBs appear to be responding to requests for online research.

#### Ethical research on the Internet

The ethics of ethnographic research becomes increasingly difficult to define in cyberspace because of the nature of the Internet. Cyberspace is a medium that is not clearly defined and is new enough that there are not universal ethical guidelines to govern its use. Issues of assent and consent, public versus private space, and different ways of recording become increasingly complicated because of both the newness and the uniqueness of the medium.

Public versus private space is increasingly complicated on the Internet because a user can transition from seemingly public spaces, to spaces that appear private, to commercial spaces without realizing that a change has taken place. Unlike more standard spaces (you notice when you leave the mall to enter your car), cyberspace flows practically seamlessly between different types of spaces and often gives the illusion of more privacy than is actually there. The Internet is often accessed from a person's home office, bedroom, or family room, which might contribute to an illusion of privacy (Sharf, 1999). Cyberspace also encourages the use of aliases, which might further contribute to the illusion of private space or privacy (Allan, 1996; Correll, 1995). As Sveningsson (2004) argued, simply because areas of the Internet (such as chat rooms) are accessible to the public does not mean that they "feel public" to the users (p. 57). The environment, the intimacy of the conversations, and the medium itself contribute to a feeling of privacy and localized community rather than public space even though the spaces are open to public eye and scrutiny.

If I consider the space to be "public" space, I am faced with another dilemma because the Internet also allows researchers to be invisible, or "lurk," in many chat rooms and other spaces in ways that are not available through traditional observational research or even ethnography.

Cyberspace allows observational and ethnographic researchers to be the "fly on the wall" because other online participants (who are not researchers) may choose to lurk for a time before joining in the conversation or may simply enjoy reading what others have typed. Correll (1995), in her research on a lesbian online community, described how she was able to lurk for some time before declaring her research interests be-

cause a number of visitors to the site simply read rather than contribute to the discussions. Mann and Stewart (2004) introduced online ethnographic research by describing the balancing act between gaining access to specific groups for research while still respecting privacy. The authors compared different ethical perspectives that have been taken, from Denzin's (1999) study of recovering alcoholics, where the researcher asserted that the public access section of a chat room was equivalent to a letter to the editor and therefore public domain, to Sharf's (1999) study, where she observed the breast cancer discussion group for some months before identifying herself as a researcher and asking permission to use the material and insights she had gained. Using traditional comparisons, as Denzin (1999) did, allows for more traditional ethical practices to apply to the Internet. Comparing chat room postings to letters to the editor in a print newspaper means that the material may be used without permission provided the original author and publication (including Web site) are given credit.

In this case, the traditional comparisons become even more complicated. The CMC I witnessed was identifiable only to the participants I was observing and not to anyone with whom they talked. This might be more comparable to sending a participant into a public space, such as a mall, with a concealed tape recorder or perhaps following a participant through the mall as she shopped and watching her interactions with other shoppers and clerks without identifying as a researcher. Would specific observation of a participant in a mall be considered ethical, or would I need to inform everyone she encountered that I was conducting a research study and that I needed both consent (or assent) forms signed. The policy also indicates that observation is allowed if those being observed remain anonymous. I am left with the question is cyberspace public space, where my observation would, I believe, fall under the guidelines of participant observation or naturalistic observation in the policy?

Issues of consent and, in case of those below legal age, assent are linked to issues of public and private space online. If the space is considered public, then observation is generally allowed under the policy without consent or assent forms being necessary (Thorne, 2004). However, if the observation is in private space, then it is much less clear if assent or consent forms are necessary. In addition, because of the transient nature of many Internet sites and the use of aliases or pseudonyms rather than real names online, obtaining consent or even assent can be difficult. Consent becomes especially difficult because you do not know if the person you are negotiating consent with is of legal age. The confidential nature of the medium means that even if



you believe that you have consent from a potential participant, he or she might not be capable of giving it. Researchers also have to contend with what Allan (1996) referred to as “the typist problem” (p. 181), whereby you never know who is actually using the keyboard. Even if you have consent from someone using a particular alias, the person may share the computer or even his or her online alias with someone else. As Allan (1996) and Mann and Stewart (2004) pointed out, you never really know who is typing, and this makes the process of lengthy and formal consent forms seem outdated, unhelpful, or, at the very least, problematic.

#### Ethical ambiguity from observations of MSN and ICQ conversations

The participants in my study outlined in interviews three categories of people they talked to online: strangers, friends (usually identified to me by a first name), and a family member of one of the participants (identified as a sibling). All of the communication occurred through CMC. I told all the participants that it was their choice to decide what they wanted to do online and if they wanted to reveal my presence to the people that they encountered.

My research was deemed to be of “minimal risk” by the REB of the university where I was working. However, to fall into the minimal risk category in the policy, my observations had to “not allow for the identification of the subjects, and . . . [not be] staged” (TCPS, n.d., Article 2.3). The first criterion, “not allow for identification of the subjects,” varied with each person the participants talked to and therefore will be dealt with separately. However, whether the observation was staged applies to all three categories identified by the participants and is important if I am to maintain my “minimal risk” standing.

In ethical terms, were the observations staged or preplanned? My instructions to the participants were to show me what they did for fun on the Internet. If they asked for clarification, I asked them to show me what they liked to do online but not to feel they had to show me things that were “private,” such as e-mail. I expected to be shown a number of different game and information sites. The two participants that were willing to share their CMC conversations (after checking with me that they were confidential) surprised me. Although the Hawthorne effect<sup>1</sup> was certainly a concern, as my presence as researcher was going to affect the ways in which the participants surfed, I was more interested in their skill levels, where they went online, and how they talked about their experiences than what they actually did. This would be comparable to researchers who study online discussion groups in a linguistic

manner rather than for content (Mann & Stewart, 2004).

However, was my presence and instructions to the participants enough to make what I was observing a staged event? At no time did I interject into the discussions except to ask for clarification on terms or symbols that I did not understand (Net-speak) or to ask about a specific skill the participant was demonstrating (primarily multitasking). Although the Hawthorne effect dictates that my presence might have an impact on the conversations, I do not believe that my presence as researcher and the participants’ knowledge that I was watching meant that the conversation or research was staged. I did not set up an experiment or have the participants act in a particular way to gauge the reaction. Simply observing a conversation, even if some of the “chatters” know that you are there, does not make a conversation staged.

The requirement that the research not allow for personal identification of the participants is more difficult to assess in Internet research. I believe that who the participants were talking to (or believed they were talking to) is a relevant part of how ethical and confidential my observations were and will deal with each category separately before discussing Internet participant observation in general.

#### Online strangers

The majority of the people the participants chatted with fit this first category of online strangers. They were people the participants had met online and did not believe they knew outside of the chat environment. They often believed they had mutual friends and therefore felt safe talking to the chatters but did not socialize with them in face-to-face contexts. The participants did not identify to these people that a researcher was present, and the conversations tended to include little to no personal information. The participants identified the people to me through their online aliases or ICQ/MSN names and did not give me any details about the person.

I believe that these conversations easily fall into the category of minimal risk, naturalistic observation because there was no risk that these online strangers could be identified. Although they were not told that a researcher was present, they were not sharing personal information, and I was recording the information in the form of field notes rather than a verbatim recording. As a result, this information was used to discuss the participants’ skill levels (multitasking, comfort levels, etc.) rather than for the content of the discussion. I believe that this aspect of my research fits the criteria of the policy because it was not tape recorded and does not in-

clude detailed personal information and there is virtually no way of identifying the online participants. This form of research would be comparable to my following a participant through a mall, where he or she interacted with strangers knowing that I was watching but did not know any of the people with whom he or she interacted.

#### Friends online

The friends that the participants talked to online fall into a more questionable category in terms of whether assent/consent forms should have been signed and in terms of whether complete confidentiality was maintained. In this category the participants knew the person they were chatting with and identified them to me either by their Internet alias or by their first name. With these people the participants would also often tell me how they know the person (from school, from ball, through another friend, etc.). The person was known to the participants but was not identifiable to me as the researcher.

As stated earlier, I left up to the participants whether they wanted to identify my presence as lurker, and in this category they sometimes chose to let the person know "someone was over" or if the conversation got personal would type "pp" (parent present) to let the other person know not to get too personal. However, the participants in the majority of the cases chose not to identify my presence as researcher. Only one participant started a conversation by saying, "A researcher is here," and then spent the rest of the time explaining who I was, why I was there, and that "he" could not be interviewed because I was only interviewing girls. On the one time that I was identified, it completely sidetracked any other discussion and ended up frustrating the participant to the point where she logged off MSN. I believe that in the majority of the cases this is why the participants were not forthcoming with information about me: simply because it was too hard to explain why I was there in a short time.

However, these online friends, I believe, still fit into the minimal risk category because little personal information was revealed (monitored by the participants and their "pp" warnings), the discussions were not recorded, and even though the participants knew the individuals, they were not identifiable to me either through the conversations or in the participants' descriptions. I used the general themes of the discussions (homework, pop culture) and general analysis of whom they talked to or thought they were talking to (the participants talked almost exclusively to boys) in my analysis but did not get into specific analysis of the conversations or personal details of the lives of the

people online. The online individuals were not told that they had been involved in a research project. However, in naturalistic observation it is not necessary to inform every person you see that you are observing them for research. The friends online could perhaps be compared to following participants through mall and having them run into a friend, whom they talk to without introducing me or explaining my presence. The friend knows that a "pp," or at least a grownup, is within "hearing" but does not know exactly who or why I am there. Again, I would hear the conversation but not be able to record it.

#### Participant's family member

The most ethically questionable conversation that I witnessed took place between the two participants who were interviewed together and a brother of one of the participants. This conversation was questionable for a number of reasons but important from a research perspective in analyzing how the participants managed power and agency on the Internet. The conversation happened through CMC and was initiated by the younger brother when he realized that his sister and her friend were online. The younger brother was not in the house and was unaware that I was in the room. The participants quickly saw an opportunity to exert power over him and engaged him in conversation. They explained to me that this brother might say something "rude" and that he often "pestered" them when they were online. They continued the conversation until the brother made a sexually explicit remark about the friend that he knew was online with his sister. They then laughed and told me they would tell him the next time they saw him that a researcher had been present to witness his questionable remark. Although this was clearly a joke to them at the younger brother's expense, it was also a clever way to exact revenge on the brother for numerous sexually explicit remarks in the past. The participants were using their knowledge of the medium and my presence to demonstrate to the brother that although he might have thought he was in control, they held the power in the conversation. I did not participate in any way in this conversation, but my presence was key in making the situation funny and satisfying for the participants and potentially embarrassing for the younger brother.

Examining this research incident through the ethical requirements set out in the policy adds to the murkiness of whether using this material is ethical. First, because the research contained open-ended interviews, participant observation, and an ethnographic component, there is some risk that the participants might be identified. Through the open-ended interviews the par-

ticipants provided me with personal information and other details that might result in their being identified by someone who knows them well and accesses the results. The participants were aware that absolute confidentiality might not be possible even if aliases were used and reviewed their transcripts from the open-ended interviews with this in mind. However, if the participants were identifiable, then referring to an online correspondent as the younger brother of a participant might make him identifiable. He has not consented (or assented) to research and is unaware that the conversation is being observed. Furthermore, some personal and potentially embarrassing information about him is revealed (the sexually explicit comment). Although I did not record the conversation and referred in general terms only to the comment (did not identify the exact wording), he was not given opportunity to request that the incident not be included in my analysis. I used the incident predominantly to analyze the participants' handling of and reaction to the conversation, but is it ethical for me to use the incident at all, knowing that the brother was unaware of my scrutiny?

This incident with the participant's younger brother is the only area of research on which I have been challenged in any way. Other conversations where the participants visited with friends, talked about homework, or made plans with a group have not raised any concerns about confidentiality or consent/assent. However, at two different conference presentations I have used the example of the participants demonstrating agency and power online by turning the little brother's attempt at harassing them into a questionable reflection on his actions, and audience members have reacted to the information.

The questions have not been raised in specific terms of ethical conduct on my part as the researcher because I did not have consent/assent. Both times the people raising the concerns were more interested in challenging my interpretation of the girls' use of their sexuality to get the brother to respond as a positive display of power than the issue that the entire conversation could be seen as deceptive or unethical. I am still not sure if they were objecting to my research or to the girls' exerting their agency. If the concerns were about the ethics of my research, it is interesting that the way they choose to explain it was not that I had acted unethically but that the actions of my participants were alarming and that my interpretation of the events was too positive. The audience members have sympathized with the younger brother, not because I observed the trick but because it happened at his expense. Perhaps it is not the ethics of the situation but a moral judgment on the exertion of young female power and sexuality that is being scrutinized.

Although I might question the motivation of the people who have criticized my interpretation of this incident, I am aware that I might be on ethically shaky ground. This is the conversation that is closest to being staged in my research. It is not staged by me as a researcher, but the participants gave the brother the opportunity to "pester" them, knowing full well that I would see the response. I did not "set up" the brother; the participants intentionally gave him space to embarrass himself. Although not clearly staged, this conversation was not accidental on the part of the participants.

As discussed earlier, there is also a remote fear that the brother could be identified by people close to the family because there are many details about and quotations from his sister cited in other published work (Whiteman, 2005). If she were identified through her personal information, her little brother would also be identified. If there is risk that the little brother could potentially be identified, then should I have sought out assent from him and consent from his parents to use the information I gained from the participants' conversation? Could any potential harm come from the brother's being identified through the research? These concerns about confidentiality, power, and consent and assent are more complicated because of the space in which the observation took place.

### **Ethical guidelines in cyberspace: Are they creeping?**

Traditional ethical standards are not easy to apply to cyberspace because the media in which the information is being gathered are not clearly defined. MSN, for example, is an instantaneous chat program that allows two users to type to each other and receive an almost instant reply. The time lapse is minimal, especially on high-speed servers, and interesting effects such as symbols and pre-recorded sounds can be used to add to the effect. However, the medium of MSN is limited to type, symbols, and these prerecorded sounds. Should MSN, then, be compared to a telephone conversation, a letter, or, perhaps, an e-mail? None of the definitions completely fit, and therefore none of the ethical protocols fit exactly either. MSN is not a phone conversation because it is limited to the parameters of the program and the participants' skill level. Although other software allows for more instantaneous voice communication, MSN is limited to text and other special effects. However, MSN is more of a conversation than a letter or even e-mail.

It could be argued that by observing an MSN conversation with only the participant on my end knowing that I was present, I was violating the privacy of the other chatter. What is interesting to me, though, is that

the one time I was identified, it destroyed the flow of conversation because I became the topic of interest and the participant could no longer “play” in the way she normally did. The participants also protected their fellow chatters not by identifying me as a researcher but by using the Net-speak “pp” if things got too personal. Rather than interrupt the flow of conversation to explain the entire research process, the participants simply safeguarded their friends by letting them know an adult was in the room. Although the chatters did not know which adult was present, they knew that they were being observed. The participants used language familiar to the chatter and a code familiar within the medium to protect the online individuals. Although the intent of the participants in safeguarding their friends was not to ensure good ethical research on my part, the result was that they did warn their friends that “someone” was watching. Perhaps one of the changes necessary to do good ethical research online is to use the already established lingo of the Net to ensure privacy rather than imposing formal academic language that will potentially derail conversations.

Although I was simply observing the participants “having fun” online, as I had asked them to do, the ethics of participant observation became blurred because of the medium of the Internet and because of the various public and private forms of communication the Internet offers. The questions of How do traditional ethical standards apply in the complicated setting of cyberspace? and How do these standards need to be further adapted or defined to apply to cyberspace? become central to defining what is ethical and what is not in online ethnographic research. If traditional standards are applied strictly to Internet research, the question becomes Is participant observation even possible in cyberspace? If assent and consent guidelines are exactly followed, and everyone who participates in a study to the extent that you have some personal information about them has to sign consent or assent forms, then large populations of the Internet will become off limits to research. The transient nature of the Internet and the assumed anonymity that Internet aliases provide means that tracking down Internet users and, if they are under age, their legal guardians to sign consent forms will become almost impossible. The typist problem discussed earlier (Allan, 1996) will also become a serious issue for researchers because researchers will never know if they are reading the writings of the person they have consent to research or her or his buddy who happens to sit down at the keyboard (or perhaps his or her underage little sister who happens to wander by). Although having no ethical guidelines for Internet research is not the answer, clearly the traditional poli-

cies and standards might not work in an environment that is based on assumptions of anonymity and fluidity.

Unfortunately, at a time when possibilities for cyber-research are exploding, ethical regulations are creeping ever more conservative. As discussed earlier, Haggerty (2004) fears that litigation and, perhaps most important, rule following as oppose to critical evaluation are becoming the key components of how research projects are evaluated. What impact will this have on new and changing areas such as CMC and other Web data? Are research guidelines becoming more conservative because of new Internet opportunities that do not follow traditional practice? Ethical creep might not be intentional, but it does seem to be shutting down nontraditional research on the Internet out of fear, rule following, and, perhaps in the case of my study, societal definitions of morality. The difficulties that social science researchers encounter with issues of consent, assent, and confidentiality in traditional ethnographic research are both magnified and complicated by the medium of the Internet, and these difficulties might unintentionally accelerate the effects of ethical creep that Haggerty already outlined as problematic and concerning.

## Notes

1. The Hawthorne effect (Kitchin, 2002) is used to describe the potential effect that knowledge of the presence of a researcher has on the individuals that are being observed.

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