

**INTRODUCTION**

The response of researchers to the ethical challenges of online research can be found both in moves towards the establishment of broad ethical guidelines for research practice (see Sharf 1999, ESOMAR, AOIR workshop, 2001; and Walther 2002, on the NIH/AAS Report), and in the personal narratives of ethical decision making by individual researchers in relation to their own research questions and contexts (for examples see Reid, 1996; Bakardjieva and Feenberg, 2001; Eichorn, 2001; Smith, 2004). In these moves towards determining ethical positions in relation to the new research contexts of the Internet, we find attempts to deal with the issues that populate what Bakardjieva and Feenberg (2001) term the “grey areas” of Internet research. These include questions relating to the public/private distinction, the difficulty of verifiability – due in part to the ‘indefinability’ of human subjects online (Jacobson, 1999) - and problematic opportunities for identity deception both by and of the researcher due to the reliance on the ‘virtual’ avatar rather than physical body online (the possibilities for such deception illustrated by the documentation of deception cases in Internet history - see Stone 1991 on the Julie “computer crossdressing” case, also Turkle, 1997; Berman and Bruckman 2001).

Rather than attempting to provide a summary of the ethical issues relating to Internet research (examples of which can be found elsewhere; see Jones, 1994; Knobel, 2002, McIntyre, 2003), this paper seeks to recruit the methods literature in order to position the ethical stance I will be taking in relation to my own research project. Because of this, certain topics are of particular interest – most importantly the private/public distinction, related issues of anonymising/crediting participants/settings etc, and the heated and ongoing debate regarding the appropriateness of covert research in online environments. The paper will examine these issues by focusing on literature which deals with experiences of research in public settings online. It will

present this work in terms of two broadly opposing positions. Firstly, a perspective which places the focus on the continued ownership of texts by their producers and thus pulls the participant into the frame of the research by seeking to reattach author to utterance (in terms of permission to quote etc), and secondly that which sees any material placed in public spaces as jettisoned from the offline self/author and hence “up for grabs.” Before doing so, I will briefly consider moves towards local, contextualised ethical stances in Internet research writing – moves which have been of particular relevance for those defending the right to carry out covert observation in cyberspace.

### **LOCALIZING ETHICAL DECISION MAKING**

My research focuses on two sites; *Silent Hill Heaven* (SHH) and *City of Angel* (CoA).<sup>1</sup> Each site contains publicly accessible forums.<sup>2</sup> Posts within these forums can be accessed without recourse to password entry points and posters have no control over who reads their messages once they ‘post’ a response or new message. The public nature of these settings and lack of need to register membership in order to see the posts has strongly influenced my ethical approach to these sites. Whilst I wouldn’t reproduce a message sent in private email correspondence without the consent of the author - as the medium seems to attribute a firm (if perhaps illusory) sense of privacy<sup>3</sup> - whilst aiming to act professionally “ethically” in accordance with *BSA* guidelines,<sup>4</sup> I would quote from publicly accessible forums without asking for

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<sup>1</sup> In identifying these sites I have already committed what some Internet researchers regard as a cardinal error/sin (see King, 1996, who privileges the need to anonymise research settings as the key ethical move in Internet research enabling a balancing of the ideal of informed consent with the simultaneous need to minimise disruption to settings and is critical of those studies which have revealed the sites of study). This decision is not taken lightly and is based upon my ethical stance in relation to the public nature of these sites – the repercussions of anonymising the sites (as Lori Kendall did with her 2002 study of the MUD ‘Bluesky’) might however be considered further – if I were to anonymise the sites I would, perhaps, also have to anonymise the TV series and the game. The decision not to anonymise has been taken by other internet researchers and cultural studies researchers examining online audience practices (including Jenkins, 1995; Baym, 2000; Gatson and Zweerink (2004))

<sup>2</sup> Since I wrote this section, *City of Angel* has introduced required free membership in order to access the forums with a username and password. Please see my note at the end of this section for brief consideration of how this may effect my handing of data from COA.

<sup>3</sup> although forwarding emails to others is perhaps a different issue

<sup>4</sup> In relation to internet based research, the *BSA* ethical guidelines state: “Members should take special care when carrying out research via the Internet. Ethical standards for Internet research are not well developed as yet. Eliciting informed consent, negotiating access agreements, assessing the boundaries

consent of the participants. This point of view corresponds with the Project X statement which Smith references as key part of her defence for non-informing the professional Listserv which was her field site of her presence as lurker/researcher<sup>5</sup>:

We view public discourse on Computer Mediated Communication as just that: public. Analysis of such content, where individuals', institutions' and lists' identities are shielded, is not subject to human subjects restraints. Such study is more akin to the study of tombstone epitaphs, graffiti, or letters to the editor. Personal? Yes. Private? No. (Smith, 2004, 230)

However, even within these two forums, this 'public-ness' is not all encompassing. . This serves to demonstrate the hybrid nature of even two sections of larger websites in terms of public/private distinction. The two forums contain, for example, gated spaces ("The Underground" Area in CoA<sup>6</sup> and the "Faculty Room"<sup>7</sup> and "Library Reserve Room"<sup>8</sup> in SHH) which require registration or a particular level of membership for access and thus might not be regarded as public in the same way. Access to these levels can be further differentiated – in the CoA Underground for example 'citizenship' can be achieved by registering and remains relatively "open" (in that there is no requirements as to who can become a member, anyone can do so), whereas in the restricted access SHH rooms, a degree of status within the site is required in order to enter (as moderator, administrator etc), hence complicating the public/private distinction further.

The distinctions I am making here between the forum and the email, between the main forum and gated sections within CoA and SHH, and the levels of access policing in these gated sections, involve the consideration and reading

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between the public and the private, and securing the security of data transmissions are all problematic in Internet research. Members who carry out research online should ensure that they are familiar with ongoing debates on the ethics of Internet Research, and might wish to consider **erring on the side of caution in making judgements affecting the well-being of online research participants.**" (BSA Ethical Guidelines, available online at <http://www.ioe.ac.uk/doctoralschool/BSA.pdf>)

<sup>5</sup> Although she did inform those members she contacted directly of her research.

<sup>6</sup> A members (or "citizens" in the terminology of the site) only section of the site which requires registration, in which galleries of fan art/fiction are stored and can be viewed, amongst other content. See <http://www.cityofangel.com/underground/index.php> for the log-in page)

<sup>7</sup> "[Faculty Room](#) Admin/Mod room, for discussions regarding forum issues." ([www.silenthillheaven/forum.com](http://www.silenthillheaven/forum.com))

<sup>8</sup> "[Library Reserve Room](#) Storage room for old or unwanted posts. Admin/Mod access only." ([www.silenthillheaven/forum.com](http://www.silenthillheaven/forum.com))

of the nature of the environment/medium. This fits in with moves in the research literature towards contextualising approaches and assumptions about the nature of online environments and the most appropriate ways of dealing with them. The emphasis in much of the recent literature has been on localization, on the problematising of 'monolithic' pronouncements of ethical conduct (Walther, 2002) in favour of varying interpretations of 'ethical pluralism' (Ess, 2002) in reference to a "context sensitivity" (Markham, 2003). Such arguments suggest that our decisions should be informed by the cultures we study<sup>9</sup> (see Cavanagh 1999, also Hine, AOIR conference notes, 2004) and also the technologies that we are engaging with and using (Roberts et al, 2003)) – a situated approach to ethical decision making (Knobel, 2002).<sup>10</sup> As an illustration, this localizing move (and hence destabilising and fragmenting of ethical "rules") can be seen in the criticising of conceptualisations of 'private' and 'public' as "uni-dimensional, rigidly dichotomous and absolute, fixed and universal" (Marx, 2001, 160), towards a conceptualisation of the private/public relationship as:

multi-dimensional (with dimensions sometimes overlapping or blurred and at other times cross cutting or oppositional), continuous and relative, fluid and situational or contextual, whose meaning lies in how they are interpreted and framed. (Marx, 2001, 160)

The general/local distinction is at the heart of a number of recent critiques of institute bodies such as some IRBs<sup>11</sup> (in particular in reference to US university research boards refusing to grant permission for internet-based research projects Johns et al, 2004) which have been presented in the literature as demonstrating a totalitarian approach to internet research ethics.

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<sup>9</sup> "Only an engagement with the frameworks of meaning and relevance of the individual communities as revealed through the forms and rituals of interaction can yield an understanding of these issues." (Cavanagh, 1999)

<sup>10</sup> This contextualising is similar to that within the research methods writing which led to the study of separate environments – the bodies of work on MUDs and MOOs for example - which similarly appears to stem from consideration of the newness of internet research (in this context the newness of the ethical questions raised by online environment) by acknowledging the various forms of settings and communications in online space and tailoring responses to them.

<sup>11</sup> See Johns et al's 2004 paper "Surviving the IRB Review: Institutional Guidelines and Research Strategies" for historical description of the establishment of Institute Review Bodies, which have the "mandate to protect the rights and welfare of human subjects." (p.107) relating to key issues (of informed consent, Voluntary Participation, Subject Anonymity, Data Confidentiality, Debriefing of Participants, Value of the Study) - and discussion of how IRBs vary in terms of their sensitivity to and understanding of internet related practice.

Central to this criticism is the charge that such bodies fail to understand the particular nature of the settings within which researchers engage, and instead draw on misplaced general preconceptions.<sup>12</sup> Johns et al note that:

Lack of understanding of the formal features of computer-mediated communication has left some IRB members confused when evaluating research proposals which seek to apply traditional research methods in the virtual realm. (Johns et al, 2004, 112)

and suggest that “IRB regulations, and those who interpret them, are firmly grounded in the literate culture of paper and print” (Johns et al, 2004, 119). Similarly, Walther’s discussion of the National Institute of Health and American Association for the Advancement of Science report on ethical practice argues that the report:

tends to characterize ‘Internet research’ in a more or less monolithic way, as though the issues it considers pertain to most kinds of research conducted online[...] Taking the report seriously may lead an IRB to require assurances from investigators that are impertinent, irrelevant, impossible, and unwieldy, depending on the nature and methodology of the specific study being proposed. (see Walther, 2002, 207)

In contrast, the move to localising and contextualising the status of the setting (taking into account the medium/location as well as the practice), proposes a tailored approach towards “locally produced” definitions of ethical conduct (Bakardjieva and Feenberg, 2001) based on “concrete examples” (Allen, 1996).

In the research literature we find ethical stances differentiated at different levels of operationalization. At the level of empirical settings for example, distinctions between technologies and mediums are tied into value

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<sup>12</sup> Most of those I have come across in the literature, and from discussion with attendees at research methods-related conferences (CAL’05, AOIR conference) have discussed these general preconceptions as resulting in the blocking of Internet research as untenable ethically due to both the lack of identifiable subjects and the ability to identify participants therefore failing to provide anonymity (a contradiction also notes by Johns et al, 2004). Interestingly, Storm A. King’s earlier (1996) work on ethical practice in online research characterises the IRBs in a different manner – in terms of an over-liberal, rather than overly-restrictive approach. She describes how “institutional review boards of major universities are granting researchers exempt or expediated (exempt from full review) status for this work, due to the public nature of the notes being analyzed” and later adds “It would be rare, indeed, to find an IRB board currently aware enough of the nuances of cyberspace interpersonal dynamics to foresee the need to protect the perception of privacy with which participants post to the public forums” (King, 1996, PAGE NO?). The IRBs are in some ways alien to me as an English student, but it could be speculated that the move from 1996 to current writings (and institute responses to these issues) has involved increasing (over?)sensitivity in relation to these issues, which has involved this movement from liberal to conservative generalising. Also, from my visit to University of Florida, Gainesville it seems that not all IRBs are hostile to internet-based research (particularly that in public forums).

judgements regarding the relative privacy or publicness of that setting – a members only MOO might be regarded as being more private than a web site for example.<sup>13</sup> The subject matter (or the content of the setting) presents another level of varying sensitivity - a support group being more vulnerable than a fan community (who, might be more used to the presence of academics in their midst see Hills, 2002). Hills work on pre-screening speculation and post-screening responses to an episode of *The X-Files* on alt.tv.X-Files for example, presents a conceptualisation of the nature of the talk of a fan community as object of academic interest:

Over the period of study, academic surveillance of the newsgroup itself constituted an insistent newsgroup presence, soliciting fan testimony as ethnographic data. As such, those posting to the newsgroup could not fail to be aware of their status as an 'object of study', or as a resource in the production of academic work... (Hills, 2002, 173)<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, whilst it might be easier (indeed necessary) to support covert research in the study of a hate group, it might be more difficult to defend the covert study of health related discussion boards such as the autism discussion groups Brownlow and O'Dell studied, suggesting that such self-advocacy groups are "the most vulnerable populations" (Brownlow and O'Dell, 2002) on the Internet.

This move towards localisation does not merely focus on the research setting, but also on the approach of the researcher, and her/his research project. The mode of data collection and analysis, for example. Walther (2002) argues that content or discourse analysis reveals less about the participants than, for example, survey information (as focus is on form of expression rather than information). A differing example of this; Roberts et al (2003) discuss how their desire to interview participants in a MOO meant that of course they had to get informed consent from the participants (they contrast this to more "passive" modes of data collection such as archival research, handling of

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<sup>13</sup> See Roberts et al for a discussion of ethical considerations relating to researching MOOs (2003).

<sup>14</sup> presents an example of a request for feedback from a poster does not state whether he announces his study to the setting but later argues that the interactions of online fandom: "These interactions are thoroughly rather than contingently textual insofar as they are composed with an imagined audience in mind (cf. Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998: 88) and are thus always already claims for attention prior to any academic scrutiny." (Hills, 2002, 176).

which, they suggest is more problematic 'ethically')<sup>15</sup>. Such arguments suggest (the rather obvious point perhaps) that different research designs contain more or less potential opportunity for harm (and therefore covert research may be more ok). Sixsmith and Murray suggest that: "documentary research on email posts and archives has its own dynamics and generates specific issues that need to be discussed within the research community." (Sixsmith and Murray, nd). Looking might be considered less intrusive than interfering (in terms of, to take this to an extreme, experimental designs). More broadly, the researcher's 'epistemological' approach to research identified by Herring comes into play. Herring's distinctions between epistemologies is referenced by Bakardjieva and Feenberg who suggest different types of research with differing relationships between researcher and subject (and hence ethical repercussions) – Naturalistic, Participatory, Consensual/Understanding and critical research (see Bakardjieva and Feenberg, 2000, 237).

Related to this, the disciplinary approach of the researcher may impact upon the ethnical stance taken. At the institutional level, it is suggested that ethical approaches might depend on the discipline to which the researcher 'belongs.' White, for example, distinguishes between the disciplinary differences between humanities and sociological research (she references English and art history as examples of 'alternative' ethical approaches). And finally, the geographic location of the researcher might be seen to influence the researcher's stance - what Marx calls "regional variation" (2001); see the AOIR report 2001 on the difference between US and Norwegian ethical guidelines, and Ess 2001, on European perspective as deontological (focusing on process) and American perspective as utilitarian (focusing on impact on subjects).

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<sup>15</sup> Citing the Australian Psychological Society's ethical guidelines, the authors note that "The APA code exempts naturalistic observations and archival research from requiring informed consent, where no harm or distress is likely to come to those researched and where their confidentiality is protected." (Roberts et al, 2003, 163). However, they follow this with a caution, citing literature that problematises this "likelihood" such as the work of King (1996) – whose ethical stance is discussed later in this section.

This movement is presented in the literature across different aspects of the research process and in relation to both the object of research and researcher. It is a move from pre-imposed ethical checklists to an ongoing process working at different levels of operationalization, specialization and shifts between localising and generalising strategies (see Brown and Dowling, 1998). Each level involves ethical weighting or less/more protection/restriction/responsibilities and the marking out of an ethical position.

It is significant that, examining the literature, we find that the rejection of a “one size fits all” approach to ethics and awareness of plurality of approaches as well as the contextualisation and localization of ethical practice, does not however, free the discourse of this literature from the influence of “shoulds” or from value judgements tied to moral inclinations. Whilst the general (or deontological) statements conceal the empirical by privileging key protocols and values, in the localised approaches to ethics where the focus is on the empirical, the general underpinnings must be uncovered, but are always influential.

### **COVERT RESEARCH – BAD, INFORMED CONSENT – GOOD?**

Alongside the negotiation and conceptualisation of rights and responsibilities in the guidelines and narratives mentioned in the introduction, sit numerous references to examples of technologically-mediated ethical misconduct and trespass both historical and imaginary/illustrative;<sup>16</sup> examples of researchers and practitioners ethically stumbling in their handling of online settings/participants/practice and the feelings of betrayal expressed by communities and individuals having discovered the presence of researchers in their midst (see King, 1996; Sharff, 1999; Eysenbach and Till, 2001; Thomas, 2004; see also White 2002 on MOOers attempts to regulate/ban

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<sup>16</sup> Storm A. King presents a hypothetical example of research-practice gone wrong, a chilling tale of actions of the researcher resulting in heartbreak, betrayal and the death of the community which she presents alongside real examples ethical misconduct in order to “demonstrate the way in which reporting naturalistic observations can irrevocably damage the community being studied.” (King, 1996, PAGE NO?). Presumably a hypothetical antidote example could also be constructed.

research on LamdaMOO). Like cautionary tales, references to such ethical mismanagements serve to provoke conformity by establishing 'forbidden' (or, at the very least, frowned upon) acts (see wikipedia entry on cautionary tales) as well as serving to unify a group of researchers who should (and do?) know better. It is perhaps no great surprise, in a research environment that increasingly seeks to involve the participants in research practice - particularly educational research and ethnographic practice - that the misconduct in these tales frequently rests on issues relating to covert research practice (see Eichorn, 2001). Observation without notification or informed consent and the failure to then anonymise, for example, or the deception by researchers withholding their true identity/purpose (see for example, Thomas on the Rimm Cyberporn study, 2004).

There is a tradition of observational research in which "it has been accepted that behaviour that is performed within the public domain may be observed and researched without consent." (See Sixsmith and Murray, nd). The Association of Internet Researchers ethics workshop committee present a number of examples of ethically acceptable covert research, one of which is research in:

"contexts such as chatrooms which are always open to anyone and thus are 'public' in a strong sense, and in which:

1. user names are already pseudonymous
2. in light of their option to always 'go private' if they wish users thus choose to participate in the public areas of the chatroom and may thereby be understood to implicitly give consent to observation."

(AOIR committee working report, 2001, their emphasis)

Underneath this example however (as well as the other exceptions in the document), is the caveat: "It should be noted that not all committee members agree" (ibid).

The literature contains strong positions against such work in favour of asking permission of sites and participants before studying them. The influence of the pro-informed consent position appears so influential that many researchers who have decided to carry out covert research 'ethically' (in public settings and anonymised subjects, for example), and who still appear to believe this was the right approach, exhibit the need to strongly defend their choices (see

Reid, 1996; Smith, 2002). In doing so they appear to betray a sense of continuing sensitivity and unease about their choices and the impact of their research. In some cases this sensitivity seems to verge on guilt as confessional narratives join the cautionary tales. Even those who discuss the public nature of particular settings provide mixed messages. Barnes for example, suggests that public spaces are indeed public but also that: "When researching any Internet group, it is a good idea to contact the group in advance and ask for permission to observe them." (Barnes 2004, p.219)). And Bakardjieva and Feenberg (who acknowledge the complex nature of the public/private distinction but also the public nature of certain environments) are firm in their criticism of covert observation:

Methodologically, the best way to collect data on group discussions would probably be not to reveal one's presence and task to group members in order not to affect their behaviour and thus to be able to capture their naturally occurring discourse. This is technically feasible in the case of all online forums that are open to anyone to join. From an ethical perspective, however, if we had performed this kind of 'naturalistic' observation on unsuspecting subjects, we would have been little better than spies.." (Bakardjieva and Feenberg, 2000, 234)

(we might suggest that the move towards contextualised ethical stances undermines the notion of 'an' ethical stance).

## **OBSERVATION IN PUBLIC?**

Traditionally, 'public places' refer to any regions in a community freely accessible to members of that community; 'private places' refer to soundproof regions where only members or invitees gather..." (Goffman, 1962, 9)

As someone who is carrying out observation within public forums, the manner by which covert observation in public spaces online (and off) is both criticised and defended is clearly of interest. The arguments both for and against such practice contain varying conceptualisations of the subject/object distinction and the rights and responsibilities of the researcher. In each case we find the same concerns that dominate discussion of online research methods - the same concern with invisibility of offline subjects and essentialising to imagined offline identities - but these responses are now tied into varying conceptualisations of ownership in virtual settings, and consideration of the

absence of “the Real Body” (Stone, 1991) online. In the context of research methodology, the latter is tied into both considerations of risk and broader issues of validity stemming from the inability of the researcher to see the participants being observed and vice versa (see White; Thomsen, Straubhaar and Bolyard). These issues are particularly pertinent in relation to human subjects research which require researchers to obtain informed consent (Jacobson, 1999, 135). Considering the construction of these issues in researchers positionings of their own research practice demonstrates how ethical issues are reconfigured as moral standpoints. These ethical/moral hybrids feed into 2 major decisions. Firstly, the protocol for constructing a relationship with the setting - whether the researcher should announce their research to the community being studied and ask for their consent; and secondly how much to reveal about these settings – how to deal with the data, decisions relating in particular to the use of quotations and citing of authors, locations etc.

The distinction between technical and perceived openness is central to discussion of these practical decisions (see McIntyre, 2003). This distinction can be illustrated in reference to Bakardjieva and Feenberg’s paper *Involving the Virtual Subject (2000)*. In this work they contrast issues of ownership in public spaces online and off (using legislation and public policy in relation to photography and the rights of the individual to their image in public environments as the real world referent). They note that in contrast to photographing individuals in real world public settings:

In the case of the Internet, the subjects themselves construct the transcript of their own actions. The exploitation of that transcript requires no special technical intervention on the part of the exploiter. (Bakardjieva and Feenberg, 2000, 239)

This contrast is founded on an emphasis of the technical context of the ‘exploitation’ - a position which appears to align with Frankel and Siang’s “technical point of view” (Bakardjieva and Feenberg, 2000, 232). The conveying of this perspective in terms of ‘convenience’ by Berry, and to a degree Bekardjieva and Feenberg in their reference to “spying”, suggests that the attributing of technical openness as a predicate of public nature is a tactical stance and ethically (and morally?) flawed (see McIntyre, who

appears to agree with him, 2003). Bakardjieva and Feeberg problematise this 'convenient' technical approach by setting against it the perceived experience of openness in terms that impose the imagined response of the participants within these settings as a central tenant of internet practice. They argue that:

the very fact that many members of online communities are only vaguely aware of the public nature of their exchanges suggests the need for caution. Their trust may be misplaced, but nevertheless it is not good for researchers to violate it without a compelling rationale. (Bakardjieva and Feeberg, , 2000, 239)

It is interesting that this assumption is founded upon the notion that even if the expectation of participants is misplaced it should be respected. This argument underpins their discussion of the ambiguous status of public forums, with what Storm A. King calls "perceived privacy" being at the root of this ambiguity (Bakardjieva and Feeberg, 2000, 234); the fact that "Internet communities' members do not expect to be research subjects." (Eysenbach and Till, 2001). In Goffman's terms that 'open, unwall'd public places' (Goffman, 1962, 10) may be (mis)regarded by members of such communities as 'soundproof regions.'

How does the technical/perceived public/private distinction relate to my chosen sites? Clearly, for the 'covert' researcher, it is impossible to begin to gauge how participants perceive the nature of the setting, other than by making reference to their postings. This approach has been proposed by Allison Cavanagh who suggests that in looking at the nature of the "organizational setting" (Marx, 2001, 160), the researcher should examine how participants within it respond to 2 main issues; firstly how they react to lurkers (or perhaps in Bakardjieva and Feeberg's terms 'spies') and secondly, how they express their understanding of the degree of openness of the space they are inhabiting (Cavanagh, 1999, url). In a similar way, King proposes 2 general issues that should be considered in relation to sites in cyberspace in order to determine how results should be reported; firstly the nature of accessibility to the site, and secondly the perceived privacy of members (King, 1996).

The posts on CoA and SHH appear (linguistically) to make an appeal to an audience/presumed readership which suggests an awareness, indeed a requirement, of a public-ness:

▫ Posted: Wed 23 Jun, 2004 1:56 am Post subject: Help?



Um... Its not help with the game that I need... I need help finding pictures from the Silent Hill series. Maria ones would be nice. I'm having a hard time finding anything for Maria at ALL. Its always the same pictures and the quality is never that good. \*frowns\* I want to make a batch of Silent Hill icons, ya see. I'd really appreciate it if you guys could gimme a hand here. \*puppy dog eyes\* (*Silent Hill Heaven* post)

However, this appeal might also appear to suggest a presumed inclusively (and hence, exclusion) in regards to this communal nature and this imagined audience, which would probably not for example, include the researcher. The suggestion of Smith that “there is a tendency to assume that participants are similar to oneself” (Smith, 2004, 228) which can be seen in the discourse in these sites which often appears to involve an imagined “likeminded people” assumption. Yet alongside these, there are also posts which demonstrate the impossibility of posters ‘seeing’ to whom they are posting (if anyone):

Anyone else still here?

Author:

Date: 01-23-05 20:23

i hope i am not alone.

(*City of Angel* post)

## **ISSUES OF LURKING, POSTING AND CUT-AND-PASTING**

Bakardjieva and Feenberg’s “little better than spies” quote might be challenged by reference to the practice of lurking. Lurking is a ‘normal’ practice in these settings, as it is online (see Smith, who makes reference to normalcy of lurking – along with her field site’s hatred of spanning and

difficult-to-reach fluid population – as behind her decision not to inform the site of her research practice within it, 2004; see also Nonnecke and Preece, 1999). This has been localised to fan studies by Nancy Baym who suggests:

“lurkers... are embraced as legitimized participants. The only people ostracized are those who attack the legitimacy of soap opera fandom. These invaders, but not the lurkers, might be considered ungratified. The nature of the network, however, is such that eavesdroppers are granted the same access to messages that full-fledged members are, and posters know this when they write.” (Baym, 1995b – ‘From Practice to Culture on Usenet’ in Leigh Star, S (ed) *The Cultures of Computing*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers :51-52 quoted in Hills, 2002, 172 )

There is a section in Baym’s *Tune In Log On: Soaps, Fandom, and Online Community* where she examines the social practice of “unlurkings” (see Baym, 2000, 132) – and this discussion is echoed in other fancentric texts (Macdonald, 1998, Gatson and Zweerink, 2004). The normalcy of lurking in my chosen research contexts (and elsewhere<sup>17</sup>) is visible in the numerous postings in which members introduce themselves to the group with comments such as:

Greetings and salutations. I've been *lurking* around as one known as a guest for quite some time and I finally decided to join up seeing as the other forum I frequent crashed. (SHH)

Just wanted to say hi. I've been *lurking* on this board for awhile so thought I'd finally join ya. 😊 (SHH)

Hi everyone I'm new here. I've been a SH fan ever since the 1 was released and have been *lurking* on these forums for some time and decided to sign up 😊 My fave SH is 2 and I plan on getting 4 when its released over here in the UK! 🇬🇧 (SHH) (*my emphasis*)

Arguments that configure lurking in public settings as spying are undermined by the fact that the ‘natural’ (at rest) state of engagement in these settings is

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<sup>17</sup> Galegher, Sproll and Kiesler’s work on the discourse differences between hobbyist and self-help electronic support groups (groups which they describe as “large, public, and disembodied” – they do not discuss the ethics of accessing and reporting such groups – particularly those with sensitive illness-related subject matters - but it appears as if they have not asked for consent) presents a post extract from an arthritis sufferer which opens in a similar way to many of those posts by newbies within my sites, with the statement: “Hi, I’ve been reading/lurking here for a few months...” (it would seem to be a conventional opening tactic in online forum/bulletin board environments). (Galegher, Sproll and Kiealer, nd) “Lurk” is one of the words (along with “‘new,’ ‘first time’ and their variants”) that they ran in their text search for locating posts in which first-time posters announced their presence and claiming membership to the groups.

shared invisibility; unless you make an utterance and thus become visible in the setting. Smith's comment that:

While we seem willing to accept a researcher openly taking notes on interaction in a public park from a bench, we might have more concerns about them doing so while hidden in a bush (Smith, 2004, 230) thus appears misplaced, as in such sites, *everyone* is hidden (although not, perhaps, in bushes). Observing without making one's presence "known" to the group might be problematic in terms of the data that can be collected from such involvement in a setting, but that would seem to depend on the research question and design, rather than any right or wrong.

The reposting of quotes or references to posters/settings has raised a range of related issues. The response of researchers to the use of direct quotations and editing of them has been tied into discussions of semiotic transformation that suggests mythologizing textual completeness as well as utterance as identity, as property. Markham discusses the editing choices of the researcher making use of online posts in research as potentially reconfiguring the "person's very being" placing its utterances "into a context of a research account rather than left in the context of experience" (Markham, 2004). This potential is presented as being damaging. She notes that this is not unique to CMC research but argues that "computer-mediated environments seem to highlight this dilemma of research reporting because it's so clear that text can be the primary, if not sole means of producing and negotiating self, other, body, and culture" (Markham, 2004). So messing with essence online again suggests a stance driven by focus on the offline self as author whose "body of work" which in effect equates to the author's identity, their "being," should not be messed with without considerations of the consequences for that author. This again to do with the question "To whom do the posts belong?" (Sixsmith and Murray, 2001) and issues of ownership and authorship, seen in Bloehlefeld's advice to researchers to ask permission of posters before reproducing long extracts of quotes (Boehlefeld, 1996). Elsewhere the distinction between observing and quoting utterances referred to in reference to response of one participant to a research project:

In the process of our negotiation of access [she] categorically refused to allow us to save analyze and quote her comments in the mailing list...

What she was reacting against was the possibility of estranging the product of her personal objectification, meant for one purpose and context, and putting it to use for another unrelated purpose beyond her control. (Bakardjeva and Feenberg, 2000, p.237)

This example is used to support the authors call for researchers to focus on “non-alienation” (Bakardjeva and Feenberg, 2000) (from control of her online self into other games) rather than privacy?

It is true that the researcher cutting and pasting a quote into a ‘scholarly’ article involves a displacement that places the utterance into a different genre, with a different audience, and makes it part of a different game. In this way, through the use of quotations from empirical settings the analysis of posted messages can be seen as constituting a radical intervention (see Walther, 2002, 206). This difference involves the introduction of ethical standpoints and concerns (both personal and professional) that may be different to the codes of netiquette that the posters in these cultures might follow. The game is different. However, whilst “harvesting” of group product for financial gain may be frowned upon (see Bakardjeva and Feenberg, 2000, 236), as public websites, CoA and SHH are both open to the acts of displacement and recontextualisation that the cut-and-paste function enables. Like many websites, the cultures of CoA and SHH frequently rest on appropriation and cross-referencing through linking to external sites and quoting (“or copying portions of a previous message in one’s response” (Herring, 2001)) which Herring states are used in order in part to “create the illusion of adjacency” but which also serves to demonstrate the ‘instability’ of texts and authorship online (see Kress 2003). More generally in Internet settings, we find texts constantly being displaced and pulled across into spaces other than that in which they were originally created (example buffy.nu with gathers rumours and news stories – with or without their permission?) and indeed it is up to the poster to specify the rules regarding re-posting (as many fan fiction writers already do). This transposing emphasises the awareness of publicness and citing/poaching across sites (a form of cross-pollination of information and material which works both ways as posters in CoA and SHH pull links in and post up images).

## **TEXT OR SUBJECT?**

In protecting the innocence of those posters who do not realise the public nature of environments in which not only social science researchers but market researchers might be taking part (and might even be joined by bots - See Turkle's description of MUDs as environment in which participants "struggle towards a new, still tentative discourse about the nature of community that is populated both by people and by programs that are social actors" (1997, 357) places an interesting spin on the researcher-announcing-presence-to-community issue in her discussion of a new issues re: bots in MUDs – whether they should disclose their artificiality to the group (1997, 364).). In aiming to "preserve" identities constructed by text on behalf of the authors, researchers take the role of nanny and policeman. Bruckman's arguing for the "real author" of "creative work" on the Internet to be verified (see White, 2002, 254) and Markham's call to protect the unity of the subject involves the move to establish the connection between avatar and subject (see Jordan, 1999).

This involves a sleight of hand in which one needs to be representative of another. White in discussing different perspectives from which to regard online production – as personas or as cultural production - talks about "the ways that Internet material is made into people" (White, 2002, 260) and how in internet ethics writing this has involved this material being "linked to guidelines for human subjects" (p.250) as "representations get conflated with physical realities and people":

Most of the ethical guidelines and concerns start with the presumption that Internet research involves human subjects and needs to follow current governmental guidelines. (White, 2002, 251)  
Realism and assumption the utterance is property of sole author, looking beyond the material to the real. Ties into AOIR questioning of distinction between subjects or authors (White, 2002; also AOIR 2001) Involves what White labels a confusion of representations for people (see her alternative discussion of avatars as art objects, rather than people in White, 2002).

The seeing past the representation to the absent body<sup>18</sup> creates a problem which appears to work in 2 conflicting ways. Firstly, that the real world subject can and should be contacted as it is a unified corollary of its online avatar (see Jones, 2004)<sup>19</sup>, and secondly that the offline identity is different from its online avatar (and may not even be 'an' it). Each is recruited by those whose focal concern is on the offline self as subject, central to the discourse of informed consent, property rights need to be established and secured in deference to an authorised voice aka the offline subject. The first is the subject that must be contacted, the second relates to the "typist problem" (White, 2002, 261) the impossibility of seeing the production of the utterance creating a questionable subject whose true identity must be confirmed or the research will be founded on misrepresentations. Each involves an emphasis on the similarity and difference from an essentialised real world subject – and involves focus of attribution to and identification of this subject (Barnes, 2004).

My response to this absent-self issue is to focus attention on the research question (Annette Markham suggests that although 'shoulds' are problematic in relation to internet research, "It should always come back to the question" (AOIR conference notes, 2004). If the research is interested in the representations of the "people" behind the texts available online then it makes sense to draw them into the frame. Thinking about this has made me increasingly aware that am not doing an ethnographic study (the sort of extensive involvement carried out by Baym for example) and more a form of textual/semiotic analysis which is happy and indeed has decided not to

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<sup>18</sup> "Nosek, Banaji, and Greenwald present a common belief when they state that the Internet "presents a unique opportunity to study individuals and groups within a naturalistic setting without the presence of an intrusive researcher" (Nosek, Banaji, and Greenwald, 2002, 174). It remains unclear what kind of participants they observe because there are no physical bodies or actions visible on the Internet. If participant observation is a "research method in which researchers observe behavior in real-life settings in which they are participants" then describing Internet research in this way and not acknowledging mediation, the constructed aspects of these representations, and the screen produces a materiality that does not exist through the Internet (Jeff Iverson Software. Dictionary of Terms & Terminology of Sociology)." (White, 2002, 252)

<sup>19</sup> This perspective has been read into the IRBs misunderstanding of internet environments "Never mind that the Internet is increasingly a medium of person-to-machine, and even machine-to-machine, communication. Who we are online, the reasoning of most IRBs seems to go, is not only identical to who we are offline, but it is a one-to-one correspondence, and all interaction online is with singular individuals." (Jones, 2004, 183)

attempt to look past the content online. Form of document analysis that perhaps might look to Chin and Gray's description of their decision not to gather informed consent in their study of online pre-release discussion of the *Lord of the Rings* films:

We decided against contacting any of the active posters on the various message boards as we felt that their general reactions and discussions were enough for us to use as data. We realise that this may lay us open to charges of academic 'lurking' but must therefore stress that we were looking primarily at the text, and Tolkien fans' talk surrounding the text itself, not at how they use the Internet as a social apparatus ... Far too often in discussions of the media, analysts have tried to read viewers and the nature of viewers off the text. But in a flip of this rubric, in this essay we have tried the reverse, by attempting to read a text off its viewers (a necessary step, of course, because there is as yet no text to study in itself). As such, our aim is not to explain or theorise these viewers since it is not ethnography that we are concerned with, but an insight into how a pre-text takes form in the discussion of pre-viewers. (Chin and Gray, 2001)

Taken to the extreme it is the essentialised subject, constructed from the multiplicity of posts, that can be betrayed by the researcher. The individual utterances have no feelings to hurt (if they are the object of the research). Here we find the distinction between participant observation and document analysis (White, 2002b; Smith, 2004) and approval for covert research if human subjects are not included (Smith, 2004).

## **CONCLUSION**

In considering the move from generalised ethical rules to localised perspectives stances I have attempted to undermine the notion of "an" ethical approach to research, in favour of the taking of ethical stances which are informed by the context, research question etc. Although this might seem like a straightforward move, the increasing bureaucratisation of ethical practices in which moves are made to establish general rules in other fields of social research practice, suggests that the importance of localised perspectives needs to be emphasised not just in relation to online research.<sup>20</sup> This

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<sup>20</sup> A presentation at the ESRC research methods seminar *Participation and Representation: Implications for Ethical Research Practice*, London, May 2005 presented a move from authority vested in medical and social science researchers in terms of making ethical decisions to a more bureaucratised

bureaucratisation is worrying as it is by necessity based on the establishing of transferable regulations. As Thomas states:

ethical precepts, while a cornerstone of research, risk being reified by moral entrepreneurs who advocate drafting explicit and immutable prescriptions and proscriptions for Net research. (Thomas, 2004, 187). This risk is clearly worth considering both in terms of real world research as well as online research.

Against a consideration of some of the moves in the literature related to internet research ethics, this paper has considered my ethical stance in relation to the two settings that I am studying – each of which is a publicly accessible setting. In making an utterance in these contexts, the members are unable to control their audience, and this is referenced in these settings in terms of addresses to an unseen audience (as well as references to lurking, as discussed). Any assumption that the audience can be controlled or restricted - such as that demonstrated by a girl who I heard ring a late-night radio talk show to ask for advice about dealing with an abusive boyfriend only for said boyfriend to ring her other phone having heard her on the radio - would be misguided. The girl was mistaking a public setting, a broadcast interaction, for a private one. Anyone posting to a public forum must be aware that anyone can read their post (as this is how the forum is arranged). This might suggest that we need to educate rather than to protect (for they are potentially under the gaze of other agents such as marketing companies etc), as Nancy Baym suggested at the 2004 AOIR conference.

It was the act of broadcasting that placed the talk-show girl (or at least her voice) into the public domain, and involved her losing control of the destination of her utterance. Some voices in the ethics writing I have considered in this paper attempt to present judgements about the use of online broadcasts in research writing in moral terms, in terms of “not being ethical.” In doing so, they appear to base their judgements either in terms of

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position in which the researcher is responsible for enacting pre-defined ethical moves – this suggests an ‘ethical’ model, regulated and curricularized in specific ways for example re: informed consent. Which the presenters suggested in terms of the move from BSA guidelines to NHS guidelines. (Wiles et al, 2005). In contrast, the BSA guidelines for example, provide a relative openness for the researcher to contextualise their approach, (although the BSA do suggest that internet researchers err on the side of caution in their handling of online research participants).

some natural law about the proper rights of the individual, in terms of a notion of property rights which one might think are in effect given up at the moment of delivery to the public space, or in terms of risk, which in the same way part of the making public of an utterance. These concerns need to be granted consideration, but should not prohibit consideration of covert practices in public environments.

Finally, I should add that in arguing that the public nature of my research contexts mean that I do not feel the need to obtain informed consent, or notify the setting of my research, I am not negating the responsibility I feel to the fans and sites that I am studying. As well as a conceptualisation of my research sites and interests then, my own particular 'localised ethical stance' is thus also informed by a feeling of affiliation with the fans' interest and practices, a desire to represent them in ways that demonstrate both professional and personal responsibility.

## **NB**

In June 2005 *City of Angel* introduced a log-on page for those wishing to view/access the boards and the posts within them. The introduction of this log-in page raises a number of issues in the sort of way that the discussion of localising ethical decision making suggests. As I have argued, need to take into account the nature of the environment, and the introduction of the log-in page suggests increased form of privacy (no matter how tenuous, in that anyone with an email address can feasibly register) of the space and hence shift in conceptualisation of the nature of the environment. I have decided to focus at this stage on postings posted before the introduction of the log-in gateway, when the site was open access and to keep separate posts that I archive from now on. The registration terms do not mention copyright or request knowledge of who members are and it does not contain any statement about what you can do with the material. As all that is required in order to register is an email address we cannot know the nature of the other registered members of the site (other than by the information they wish to share on members' pages). However, the log-on page does suggest in Goffman's terms a "gated area" in that only members can enter – therefore I need to consider this in relation in relation to my handling of data from the site. It might, for example, strengthen the need to anonymise posters (who are already anonymous, in terms of the online avatar and "real world" person, but citing the avatar still bears meaning within this context). And I will consider paraphrasing rather than direct quotations?