Undoing Ethics

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Rethinking Practice in Online Research

Springer

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ISBN 978-1-4614-1826-9 e-ISBN 978-1-4614-1827-6
DOI 10.1007/978-1-4614-1827-6
Springer New York Dordrecht Heidelberg London

Library of Congress Control Number: 2011943348

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Printed on acid-free paper

Springer is part of Springer Science+Business Media (www.springer.com)

Preface

Are you feeling blue? the headline in the free daily newspaper Metro¹ asks. Beneath a large image of two blue aliens, the article describes how the ‘3D fantasy world of blockbuster film Avatar [...] has left some cinema-goers unable to cope with reality – and even feeling suicidal’. The writer reports how:

On the fan forum site Avatar Forums, a topic thread entitled ‘Ways to cope with the depression of the dream of Pandora being intangible’ has received more than 1,000 posts. ‘Ever since I went to see Avatar I have been depressed,’ wrote a poster called Mike. ‘Watching the wonderful world of Pandora and all the Na’vi made me want to be one of them. I even contemplate suicide thinking that if I do I will be rebirthed in a world similar to Pandora [where] everything is the same as in Avatar.’ Another movie-goer called Elequin added: It’s so hard I can’t force myself to think that it’s just a movie and to get over it, that living like the Na’vi will never happen. I think I need a rebound movie.

Typing ‘Avatar Forums’ into Google takes the curious reader directly to the bulletin boards of avatar-forums.com where the threaded discussion is played out in full. A notice at the top of the page reminds the visitor that they are currently ‘viewing our boards as a guest which gives you limited access to view most discussions and access our other features’. It appears the usernames presented in the article have not been changed.

A number of similar stories are published on other news and media sites. A story on www.techradar.com² (which uses quotes but does not name users) is more openly disparaging of the members of the forums (‘The web has been awash with slightly delusional fans [...]’) and provides readers with a hyperlink direct to avatar-forums.com. A CNN article portrays the fans in a similar tone (‘A post by a user called Elequin expresses an almost obsessive relationship with the film.’) and makes reference to extracts from an interview with one of the site’s members:

Ivar Hill posts to the “Avatar” forum page under the name Eltu. He wrote about his post-“Avatar” depression after he first saw the film earlier this month.

¹ Metro, Wednesday, January 13, 2010.

² <http://www.techradar.com/news/internet/avatar-s-3d-planet-leaves-moviegoers-depressed-and-suicidal--663355?src=rss&attr=all>

"When I woke up this morning after watching Avatar for the first time yesterday, the world seemed ... gray. It was like my whole life, everything I've done and worked for, lost its meaning," Hill wrote on the forum. "It just seems so ... meaningless. I still don't really see any reason to keep ... doing things at all. I live in a dying world."

Reached via e-mail in Sweden where he is studying game design, Hill, 17, explained that his feelings of despair made him desperately want to escape reality.³

On the forums of avatar-forums.com, opinion appears mixed about the coverage the site has received and journalists' use of content from the boards. Some members note their discomfort with the use of usernames and real names. One states that they would feel uncomfortable with their name being published in this way. Another responds 'yeah, I wonder if they had permission'. Another is concerned about their words being taken out of context, worried that it appeared that they were advocating suicide ('I just want to clarify that I am 100% sure that suicide will not achieve that'). Some remind users that the site is largely a safe haven with most members being people 'who won't exploit you on International media'. Others celebrate the fame the coverage has brought to the site (addressing the user Elequin, one thread begins 'you're famous now!').

The reporting of Avatar fans' online discussions described above raises a host of complex ethical issues. Discussion of a popular film on a publically accessible website might appear fair game, but if these were academic rather than journalistic interventions, the decisions made in the very public reporting of these postings would be controversial⁴. What might we make of the naming of websites and use of real usernames which deny anonymity to the Avatar fansites and their members? What about the use of verbatim extracts from posts, which has the same effect, as search engines enable easy identification of, and access to, the location of their origin? What about the issue of consent – apparently neglected here? The contrasting reactions of the posters described in the reports, expressing feelings of violation, anxiety, pride and also excitement, raise questions about the responsibility of the reporter to their subjects. They also suggest that members of the forums have very different ideas about the status of their activity (public? private?). At the same time, the negativity of the reporting, apparently based on outsider readings of the sites, with fans characterised as 'obsessive' and 'deluded', might be questioned. The reports also establish connections between online identities (Eltu) and the 'real' people beyond the screen (Ivar Hill), people who, in this example, appear to be under the age of 18. Finally, although the subject matter of these fansites may appear trivial, we also have the reporting of a potentially sensitive topic in discussion of depression and suicide.

Any student or researcher entering into such online environments for the purpose of research needs to be able to demonstrate that they have considered the ethics of their practice, their use of data and their relationship to the researched settings. No matter what the activity they are interested in, it is likely that they will be asked to account for the decisions they make and describe the strategies they have developed

³ 'Audiences experience "Avatar" blues' Jo Piazza, CNN January 11, 2010 8:06 a.m. EST <http://www.cnn.com/2010/SHOWBIZ/Movies/01/11/avatar.movie.blues/index.html>

⁴ And it is worth noting that the use of my entry into the site for the purposes of this preface itself raises ethical questions.

for managing the ethics of their work. The conflicting guidance on Internet research practice and the diverse nature and characteristics of different online environments can make this task difficult.

This book examines some of the challenges that researchers may face when researching online activity and the ways that existing guidance on research ethics can inform our responses to these. This is not, however, solely a book about 'Internet research ethics'. The development of the Internet has reinvigorated ethical debates, but many of the dilemmas and debates it presents to researchers are not new. For this reason, rather than just specialising to the Internet, the following chapters introduce a number of key ethical questions, aiming to expose and explore some of the continuities between the study of online and offline domains.

The book conceptualises the *doing* of research ethics as involving the production of an ethical stance in respect of key ethical issues and methodological decisions. This stance is established in relation to a number of different domains in which ethics is articulated/embodied (rather than involving self-evident notions of what actions might be 'good' or 'bad') and involves a consideration of the researcher's accountability to different audiences and interested parties. The chapters examine the ways such stances might be established and unsettled during research and the resources that might be used to inform this ongoing work.

Although I discuss the use of Internet-based tools for generating data (via the use of online interviews and surveys etc.), my primary focus is the ethics of online research that is based on methods of observation and participation. Of particular interest is the use of unobtrusive observation (so-called lurking) in online domains. In considering the key ethical questions that researchers using such methods face, the book also examines the way that ethics are codified, articulated, and experienced in academic and non-academic domains and in different contexts, from the research literature that researchers engage with, the varied online settings they may explore, and their personal and institutional contexts. The book aims to consider the ways that the articulation of ethics in these different contexts might inform each other. Whilst the following chapters do not provide a roadmap for the ethical conduct of online research, I hope that they provide a useful way of thinking about the reader's own position in respect of these issues.

Acknowledgements

There are a number of people that I would like to thank for their help and support in the writing of this book. Some provided encouragement, a few were kind enough to read draft chapters and provide invaluable comments and others have been willing to talk to me about ethics and research. I am extremely grateful for all their contributions to this text. Thanks in particular to Maria Touri, Caroline Pelletier, Joanne Metivier, Diane Carr, Meredith DiPietro, Will Gibson, Aleks Krotoski, Elizabeth Buchanan, Neil Selwyn, Martin Oliver, Andrew Brown, David Buckingham, the members of Paul Dowling's research students' group, my colleagues at the Department of Media and Communication at the University of Leicester and the editors of the *International Journal of Internet Research Ethics*. I am particularly indebted to Russell Dudley-Smith for his extremely helpful critical and educational engagement with this book as well as my earlier work on fans. Massive thanks also to Claudia Lapping who has helped me to clarify my ideas on many occasions. I am grateful for her patience in doing so, and for her rigorous and insightful feedback. Most of all, I would like to thank Paul Dowling, who was an outstanding Ph.D. supervisor and has contributed hugely to the development of my ideas. This book could not have happened without his enthusiasm for my work, his intellectual perspicacity and his generosity in reading and re-reading draft chapters. I value his friendship and always look forward to our conversations.

I am also grateful to my excellent friends Nicole Slavin and Kathryn Cullen for providing welcome distractions during the writing of this book.

Love and thanks to my family. Thanks in particular to my parents who have always encouraged and supported me. This book is dedicated to them.

Finally, thanks to Jamie.

My Ph.D. research, which is discussed in the following chapters, was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

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