Qualitative E-Interview Tips

E-Interview Research Ethics

Principles of Fair Information Processing	Implications for Interviewers
• Personal data should be collected for one specific purpose. • People should have access to the data collected about themselves. • Personal data should be guarded against risks such as unauthorized access, modification or disclosure. • People have the right to have inaccurate data corrected. • Data should be collected in a context of free speech. • Personal data are not to be communicated externally without the consent of the subject who supplied the data. Adapted from (Mann & Stewart, 2000)	• Be clear about the data you want to collect from the interview and associated observations as well as from the participant's website, blog or social networking profiles or posts. If circumstances change, and you want to use additional data, negotiate with the participant. • Allow participants to see transcript or notes, and to make corrections or additions. • Make sure that participants know their responses are voluntary, and they can change their minds or discontinue participation. • Protect the data. If the interview is occurring on a proprietary site, make sure you can download the recording and then delete it from the server. • Be clear in discussions and agreements about the possible future use of the research findings, such as in publications.

Privacy, Confidentiality and Digital Identities

Privacy in the research context refers to steps taken to safeguard interviewees' right to integrity and self-determination. This means research participants have the right to decide what kind of information to share with the researcher and under what conditions (Elm, 2008).

The Internet complicates the fundamental research ethics assumption that our priority is protection of human subjects. It is not always clear whether data is being collected from a human subject. Is an avatar or other digital representation a person? Can we assume a person is wholly removed from large data pools, even when no personally-identifiable information is collected? (Markham, Buchanan, & Committee, 2012). Harm may be less clear when it is not obvious what connection exists between an online identity and his or her real-life and whether

For more about online interviewing see *Qualitative Online Interviews* and *Cases in Online Interview Research* by Janet Salmons, PhD and visit see www.vision2lead.com.

participation in the study could enable psychological, economic, physical, harm for the person associated with the digital representation (Markham et al., 2012).

What ethical expectations are established by the online community, group, site or list? What are the norms, community initial ethical expectations/assumptions of the authors/subjects being studied? For example: Do participants in this environment assume/believe that their communication is private? Do participants have different expectations for research use of text, versus pictures or media? In interview studies where consent is a given, these issues need to be discussed.

Should individuals' Internet identities, often very different from their "real" identities, be afforded the same protections as their identities off the Internet? For example, if a researcher wants to mention someone by using their on-line pseudonym in an article, would using that name violate the privacy of the pseudonymous identity?

Carusi (2008) feels it is important to distinguish between information on "thin identity" or "thick identity." She describes thin identity as the identity of a particular individual as a re-identifiable identity. Carusi illustrates the distinction with this example: if *thin* identity has to do with a particular individual and the fact that she has a certain medical condition, then *thick* identity concerns her representation as a victim, a fighter, or survivor of that condition (Carusi, 2008). An online researcher may breach the participant's confidentiality by appropriating images, quotations, stories, or other representations even if the researcher removes any personal information and thick identity has been detached from thin identity. Search engines allow people to enter phrases and locate the original post, with the writer's name removed. *As an ethical researcher, one of your challenges is: how can you write up your findings in a way that will preserve respect human and digital identities and preserve anonymity?*

Due to the complexity of and changeable nature of Internet contexts, harm may emerge at any point in the research process. The fluidity of Internet contexts requires that researchers attend to ethical issues throughout the process, not simply at the beginning. Consent may need to be renegotiated while the study is underway, or even after the study is completed and the researcher is deciding what to include in a publication. Researchers and reviewers should be prepared to address this reality.

With these issues in mind, the nature of the consent agreement is critically important. You can use and adapt this Generic Sample Informed Consent Form to ensure that essential ethical decisions are made by and with the participant.

Carusi, Annamaria. 2008. Data as representation: Beyond anonymity in e-research ethics *International Journal of Internet Research Ethics* 1 (1):37-65.

Mann, C., & Stewart, F. (2000). *Internet communication and qualitative research: a handbook for researching online*. San Francisco: Sage.

Markham, A., Buchanan, E., & Committee, A. E. W. (2012). Ethical decision-making and Internet research: 2012. Recommendations from the AoIR Ethics Working Committee from http://aoir.org/reports/ethics2.pdf

Additional Resources about Research Ethics

- Association of Internet Researchers: Ethical decision-making and Internet research
- "Informed Consent in Social Research: A Literature Review" by Rose Wiles, Sue Heath, Graham Crow & Vikki Charles
  http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/85/1/MethodsReviewPaperNCRM-001.pdf
- "Informed consent in research based on primary data collection"
  http://www.port.ac.uk/departments/faculties/portsmouthbusinessschool/research/pbs ethics/filetodownload,93117,en.pdf
- New Social Media, New Social Science… and New Ethical Issues with links to two reports on users, and on social media in research and ethics codes.
- Policy & Guidance - U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and Checklist
- World Health Organization: General Templates and Form For Research with Children