



Encountering distressing information in online research: a consideration of legal and ethical responsibilities

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Abstract

This article explores the reasons why internet researchers should contemplate their responsibility for encountering distressing disclosure in the course of their online research. 'Distressing' disclosure refers specifically to information that indicates an online communicant is considering harming him/herself or another/others (e.g. online users' announcements of suicide intentions, threats to kill another person, etc). Given both the nature of online communication and research, those who study internet users and communities may find themselves particularly likely to come across distressing information in their research. Using personal homepages as a case in point, this article inquires: are researchers legally accountable for reacting in some way to the distressing online self-disclosure of those they study? Absent a legal responsibility, do researchers have any ethical or moral obligation to intervene? If an ethical responsibility does suggest itself, what are the barriers to intervention? Finally, how might online researchers prepare themselves for their encounters with distressing self-disclosure?

Key words

ethics • internet • internet and law • internet research
• law • legal • research ethics

Consider the following hypothetical scenario. Two researchers from university X are interested in studying heavy metal fans. To learn more about this population, they locate a heavy metal web ring¹ on the world wide web and proceed to analyze ring members' personal world wide web (WWW) homepages. During their research, they come across a personal homepage in the web ring created by two boys from Colorado. On the homepage, the boys profess their frustration with their lives, peers, and families. They also detail their intentions to conduct a military-like assault at their high school, killing those who have ridiculed and bullied them. The researchers analyze the homepage as they have the others and move forward in their study.

Weeks later, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold kill 15 students at their high school in Columbine, Colorado. It becomes clear to the researchers from university X that these boys were the authors of the disquieting homepage they analyzed in their heavy metal study. Meanwhile, across the nation, officials and parents discuss the boys' homepage and claim that it confirmed Harris's and Klebold's anger, detachment, and sadism. Many lament that the boys' public 'cry for help' had gone unheeded.

Retrospectively, the researchers find themselves questioning their decision to regard the boys' online threats solely as research 'data'. Moreover, they wonder what their fellow Americans' reactions might be if it came to light that they had been studying the boys' homepage just weeks prior to the massacre, and that they were privy to the boys' gruesome plans. They ask themselves, should they have behaved differently? Are they liable, either legally or ethically?

QUESTIONING RESPONSIBILITY

Although it is a mix of hypothetical and real events, the above scenario raises an important question facing any conscientious offline researcher, but one that has unique import for *online* researchers. That is, to what extent are researchers responsible for reacting, in some way, to distressing information that they encounter during the process of their internet research? By 'distressing', I refer specifically to disclosure indicating that online communicants are considering harming themselves or others. Examples of this kind of distressing disclosure include online users' announcements of suicide intentions, descriptions of self-destructive behaviors such as self-mutilation, or threats to kill, rape, or maim other person(s).

Disclosures of this kind are certainly not relegated to the internet, nor are researchers exclusively likely to encounter such admissions in an online

situation. However, the likelihood that internet researchers will encounter distressing information online is heightened by two factors. First, the internet as a communication vehicle allows for anonymity, private authorship, and public reach. These qualities appear to actually promote internet users' self-disclosure (Reid, 1996; Childress and Asamen, 1998; Miller and Gergen, 1998; Thompson, 1999). More self-disclosure online potentially translates into an increased chance that researchers will encounter *distressing* self-disclosure in their online research pursuits. Second, the internet allows researchers significantly more access to the expression and communications of individuals that previously may have gone unnoticed. Admittedly, distressing disclosures are probably quite frequent in offline settings. However, they are significantly less likely to be expressed to, or intercepted by, a researcher. Thus, given both the nature of online communication and the nature of online research, those who study internet users and communities may find themselves particularly likely to come across distressing information in their research endeavors.

In light of this possibility, this article explores the reasons why online researchers should contemplate their responsibility for encountering such disclosure. Are researchers legally accountable for reacting in some way to the distressing online self-disclosure of those whom they study? Absent a legal responsibility, do researchers have any ethical or moral obligation to intervene? If an ethical or moral responsibility does suggest itself, what are the barriers to intervention? Finally, how might researchers prepare themselves for their encounters with distressing self-disclosure in their online research?

Although the discussion presented here pertains to a broad range of computer-mediated communication (including, for example, newsgroups, chatrooms, and bulletin boards), I will focus primarily on distressing self-disclosure that researchers observe on WWW personal homepages. Personal homepages are personally focused, electronic documents published by individuals to the WWW. In the context of data collection, personal homepages can be regarded as pre-existing, publicly accessible, asynchronous communications that permit relatively unobtrusive examination. Studies on personal homepages have revealed that distressing self-disclosure is not uncommon (Stern, 1999, 2002a, 2002b). This article will draw from real and hypothetical homepage examples to address the complexities involved with encountering distressing disclosure in the course of one's research.

ENCOUNTERING DISTRESSING INFORMATION ONLINE: ARE RESEARCHERS LEGALLY ACCOUNTABLE?

The internet has become an increasingly popular tool for studying populations that have traditionally been difficult to investigate. Such forays

are made possible by online researchers' ability to transcend the geographical, physical, and time barriers that previously limited both the scope and content of individual research studies, and by making accessible the actual communications and artifacts of individual internet users. For example, scholars have employed the internet to gather information about sexual minorities on college campuses (Leider, 1999), families dealing with rare diseases (Yeaworth, 2001), children with medical problems (Fleitas, 1998), women with eating disorders (Collins, 2000), working class gay men (Appleby, 2001), and suicidal individuals (King, 1995; Miller and Gergen, 1998). In each instance, the internet offered an entrée and subsequent insight into communities of people whose lifestyles or situations potentially rendered them more likely to reveal distressing information online. These types of internet studies have proven invaluable in illuminating the lived experiences and concerns of various peoples (e.g. Fleitas, 1998), in demonstrating the utility of online communication forums for diverse individuals and groups (e.g. Miller and Gergen, 1998), and in highlighting the usefulness of the internet for data collection (e.g. Smith and Leigh, 1997; Murray and Sixsmith, 1998).

Despite the recent flood of books and articles promoting and describing online methodologies (Paccagnella, 1997; Giese and Kaufman, 1998; Lindlof and Shatzer, 1998; Jacobson, 1999; Zhang, 2000; Riva, 2001; Yeaworth, 2001), few communication scholars have questioned the legal liabilities involved with encountering distressing information online. More commonly, discussions of the legal issues manifest in online settings have been raised by health care professionals, such as physicians, nurses, and especially therapists. The preponderance of attention has focused on the responsibilities of those who counsel patients online. Discussions of this practice, known alternatively as webcounseling (Bloom, 1998) or cybercounseling (Hughes, 2000), acknowledge (although do not resolve) the unique problems that a therapist faces when an online patient threatens to harm him/herself or others (Childress and Asamen, 1998; Hughes, 2000).

Online therapists are particularly likely to question their legal obligations when encountering distressing information online because *offline* therapists do, in certain circumstances, have a legal duty to warn others of potential harm and to protect patients from themselves. This legal duty was confirmed in the 1976 California Supreme Court case, *Tarasoff v. Regents of the University of California* (17 Cal. 3d (CA, 1976), 1978 Cal. Lexis 297), in which a psychologist was held liable for failing to warn a woman that her ex-boyfriend had announced his plans to kill her in a confidential therapy session. One of the principle reasons that the Court held the psychologist accountable was that he maintained a 'special relationship' with the patient. The Court articulated:

Under the common law, as a general rule, one person owes no duty to control the conduct of another, nor to warn those endangered by such conduct . . . except when the defendant stands in some special relationship to either the person whose conduct needs to be controlled or in a relationship to the foreseeable victim . . .

In addition to the existence of a special relationship between therapist and patient, another fundamental concept for the *Tarasoff* Court was foreseeability of the act – that is, ‘the conditions under which the therapist should have predicted that harm would occur and therefore had a duty to breach confidentiality, disclose information, and protect the third party’ (Dickson, 1998: 152). Rather than contend that therapists should be able to accurately predict patients’ behaviors, the Court argued that therapists are trained professionals who can be expected to exercise a ‘reasonable degree of skill, knowledge, and care ordinarily possessed and exercised by members of that professional specialty under similar circumstances’. The importance of professional skills in determining legal liability was upheld as recently as 1998 in *Emerich v. Philadelphia Center for Human Development* (554 Pa. 209; 720 A.2d 1032 (PA, 1998)), a case in which the Pennsylvania Supreme Court confirmed that mental health professionals can be reasonably expected to possess the skills that would enable them to predict violent behavior, particularly when a specific threat has been made. Not only have the courts upheld responsibilities in instances where therapists have learned of patients’ plans to hurt others, but also in instances where patients have intended to harm themselves (*Eisel v. Board of Education*, 597 A2d (MD, 1991), 1991 Md. Lexis 184). Given these precedents, webcounselors may have good reason to carefully deliberate their legal responsibility when encountering distressing information online.

In light of the precarious position in which online therapists find themselves, what can we say about the legal responsibility of those who merely conduct research (rather than counsel patients) on the internet? Consider the scenario posed at the beginning of this article, in which researchers hypothetically studied the Columbine gunmen’s homepage. As described in the imaginary situation, the researchers exclusively studied the online texts but did not interact in any way with the homepage authors. Thus, it would seem that they did not share the requisite ‘special relationship’ with the authors to evoke an affirmative duty to warn anyone of the boys’ alleged plans. Although the *Tarasoff* Court did not specify precisely what constitutes a ‘special relationship’, most recent attempts to extend duties to protect/warn beyond therapist–patient or custodial relationships have failed in the courts (*Eisel v. Board of Education of Montgomery County*, 1991). For example, a church pastor was not held legally liable for failing to refer a counselee to a mental health specialist (*Nally v. Grace Community Church*, 47 Cal.3d (CA, 1988). The relationship

between a researcher and his/her online subject is likely to be seen as more tenuous than other types of relationships that have been deemed insufficient to obligate a legal duty.

Even if some type of special relationship was determined to exist between online researchers and their subjects (which, as mentioned, seems improbable), it is likely that a legal duty would still not eventuate. Consider once again the scenario posed at the beginning of this article. As cultural researchers interested in the study of heavy metal fandom, the researchers could not reasonably be expected to gauge the mental health of the homepage authors, nor to predict the likelihood that the boys would act on their threats. They presumably had no training in mental health, and their professional role as cultural researchers does not encompass a duty to detect mental wellness. Thus, the two key concepts designated as vital in determining legal responsibility (special relationship and foreseeability) ostensibly relieve homepage researchers of any legal duty.

Online researchers with clinical training or who maintain expertise in deviant behaviors, however, may find their situation less clear-cut (see Baume et al., 1997, 1998). For example, clinician-researchers Richard et al. (2000), described the dilemma that they faced when they came across an internet user on a listserv who blatantly discussed plans for his own suicide. The researchers had no therapeutic relationship with the author, but they did possess knowledge that the suicidal author might have found helpful (e.g. suggestions for how to handle his depression). After deliberating their legal and ethical responsibility to intervene, the researchers ultimately decided to respond to the individual. However, they expressed uncertainty about how to navigate similar situations in the future and identified the extra complexity that mental health professionals may encounter in their online endeavors.

Overall, however, the historical rarity of researchers being held accountable for a duty to warn or protect (Appelbaum and Rosenbaum, 1989) suggests it is unlikely that any legal responsibility would be extended to online researchers, even those with professional skills or knowledge. Two factors in particular suggest this. First, online researchers are significantly less able than offline researchers – and especially offline therapists – to verify the facts surrounding particular subjects. For example, medical records, family histories, and physical conditions often provide offline therapists with a context in which they can evaluate their patients. Online researchers do not have such environmental or contextual information available to them in order to determine the veracity of the distressing disclosure of those they study. Second, online communication is rife with possibility for misinterpretation. Tone, volume, facial expressions, and gestures all provide cues for the interpretation of messages; these cues are missing in online communication. Again, the absence of these contextual cues arguably makes

it more difficult, if not impossible, to determine the seriousness with which one should take online authors' disclosure. These factors are likely to even further mitigate researchers' legal responsibility for handling distressing self disclosure.

ENCOUNTERING DISTRESSING INFORMATION ONLINE: DO RESEARCHERS HAVE ANY ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY?

Despite the improbability that online researchers would be held legally accountable for failing to act after encountering distressing information online, possible *ethical* and *moral* responsibilities remain an important consideration. As Tiles and Oberdiek (1995: 181) articulately observed,

[a conscientious researcher] does not ask, 'What can I get away with without violating the law or leaving myself open to a law suit?' but 'What precautions must I take to avoid moral culpability for my conduct?' The former looks to a judge sitting on a bench; the latter, to one's conscience as judge.

In considering such precautions, researchers generally follow accepted ethical guidelines for the conduct of their research. In the US, most human subjects research is governed by the Belmont Report, drafted in 1979 by The National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research. This report identified the main principles aimed at guiding ethical human subjects' research, two of which are especially germane to this article. These include respect for persons and beneficence.

Respect for persons

The first principle, respect for persons (also called autonomy), has been discussed quite extensively in the internet research literature. Respect for persons incorporates the notion that individuals should be treated as autonomous agents, who should decide for themselves whether they wish to participate in a research project. Those persons with diminished autonomy are entitled to protection (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical Research and Behavioral Research, 1979). This principle, which finds its expression in the informed consent document, applies specifically to human subjects research. However, one issue for internet researchers is determining if their research truly qualifies as human subjects research. When deliberating this distinction, the Department of Health and Human Services suggests that researchers ask themselves: (1) if there is some kind of 'interaction or intervention with a living person that would not be occurring except for the research project at hand'; or (2) if 'identifiable *private* data/information will be obtained for this research in a form associable with the individual' (Office for Protection from Research

Risks, 2000; emphasis added). Either of these instances would qualify one's project as human subjects research.

Although these guidelines may have sufficed in traditional research settings, research conducted via the internet is not so easily categorized. On the contrary, internet researchers vehemently disagree about both the extent to which cyberspace is a public or private space, and the extent to which communications online are, in themselves, public or private information (Waskul and Douglass, 1996; Frankel and Siang, 1999; Mann and Stewart, 2000). These basic determinations are intrinsic to determining whether online research should even qualify as 'human subjects' research. In brief, the controversy divides those who perceive internet communications that are publicly accessible as 'public' communications, from those who contend that simply because communications are publicly accessible, it does not mean that online authors consider their online discourse to be 'public' information or that they recognize the extent to which their communications can be accessed by others (Waskul and Douglass, 1996). Contentious topics such as the invasion of privacy and the need (or absence thereof) for informed consent pervade this debate (see Frankel and Siang, 1999). In an effort to simplify the discussion at hand, this article works under the assumption that personal homepages published on the WWW do not constitute human subjects research in the traditional sense (as, for example, outlined by the Office for Protection from Research Risks, 2000), because their contents are intentionally published to a large, unfocused, and unmoderated forum, the WWW. (Admittedly, this assumption may not be acceptable to some scholars.) However, merely because the study of homepages does not qualify as *traditional* human subjects research (bypassing, perhaps, the need for informed consent) does not necessarily mean that researchers can simply discount any responsibility for encountering distressing information in these online documents, considering that they were, in fact, created by very *real* people.

Instead, researchers must determine the extent to which the ethical principles that guide their studies of 'real' people should extend to the manifestations of real people, i.e. their online communication (see also Ess and Association of Internet Researchers, 2002). After all, one does not exist in cyberspace until one literally writes oneself into existence. Because of the absence of a physical body or audible voice in online research, researchers might be more tempted to view online disclosure strictly as 'data'. The tendency to objectify subjects does exist in offline research, but it is heightened in online research as Waskul and Douglass expressed:

Although a certain degree of objectification will occur in any research scenario . . . the utter absence of flesh and blood can potentially result in extreme objectifications. Such objectifications will always impair a researcher's ethical judgement. (1996: 137)

King agrees, concluding that ‘Notes on a computer screen are simple to objectify. It is easy for researchers to fail to show respect for the very real people that make up the communities under study’ (1996: 127). Despite this propensity to objectify online authors, researchers would wisely remember that behind every online communication is a real, living, breathing person. The question thus becomes: how should researchers react to distressing online disclosure, when the very nature of the medium compels them to regard the authors as objects rather than subjects? How can researchers be expected to personalize their subjects if they never even ‘know’ who really authored the distressing disclosure? Moreover, if they cannot really know who authored it, how can they be expected to take it seriously?

The irony of this line of questioning is that cyberspace has been touted as a freeing place for people to be more open and honest than in offline settings. For example, many homepage authors claim – and much research indicates – that computer-mediated communication can allow people to be *more* ‘themselves’ than in their offline lives (Turkle, 1995; Chandler, 1998; Stern, 1999). Indeed, many people feel inhibited by their embodied selves, but (disembodied) personal homepages allow them to speak more authentically and in words and ways that they might not in their offline lives. Moreover, personal homepages are different from other documents because they are living; that is, they are up-to-date and modifiable. (For example, research on homepages revealed that some authors updated their pages daily, and one as frequently as five times a day; Stern, 2002a). As living documents, personal homepages are more likely to be a reflection of authors’ current states of mind than traditional research documents (i.e. an old journal or letter), thus increasing the appropriateness of considering them as authentic and timely presentations of the self.

On the other hand, some scholars doubt the extent to which authors’ online self-presentations reflect their real-life selves – meaning the embodied selves that users walk around with in daily life. Because there is no physical contact between internet users, and because communication can take place anonymously, users are free to ‘construct’ online personae. For example, on personal homepages a man can present himself as a woman, an obese person can be slender, a Latino can be Asian, and a young person can be old and wise. Bromberg (1996) called this ‘identity play’.

Several scholars suggest that online self-presentation is useful for creating or exploring identity. Turkle (1995) proposed that different internet users present themselves differently and for a variety of reasons. She considered the internet to be a safe space for users to experiment with identities before adopting them in real life. Tobin (1998) similarly suggested that the internet offers respite from a difficult world, and an opportunity to safely test-run possible real life selves. After all, homepages allow authors to continually

modify both the style and content included on the site, just as people often try to change their image through change of clothes and speech.

As researchers attempt to problematize their responsibility for encountering distressing information online, they are thus compelled to question how to reconcile the potentially hyper-authentic nature of personal homepages with their simultaneous distant/intangible nature. Should researchers privilege their contents more or less than real-life disclosure? How can researchers avoid placing improper weight on their authenticity? And thus, the initial paradox reappears: how should researchers ethically react to distressing homepage disclosure when the very nature of homepages prevents them from determining how 'authentic' the disclosure actually is? We can easily agree that personal homepages are, to some extent, representative of their authors (even if someone is engaging in identity play). However, researchers are still disconnected from the authors, and cannot know anything about them beyond what they tell and/or show. Consequently, researchers may end up placing more weight on the 'truth' of their self-disclosure than they should, while simultaneously placing less weight on their responsibility for encountering it.

Some might argue that researchers, whether online or offline, always battle this question of authenticity. But the online situation arguably makes it much more difficult to determine how seriously to take distressing disclosure. Think about another hypothetical situation. A researcher sits in a crowded train station in order to observe communication strategies for saying goodbye. A middle-aged man runs into the station and shouts out, to no one in particular: 'I'm going to kill myself!' Chances are high that nobody, including the researcher, would do much at all. Rather, people would likely assume this man was a bit crazy and, after a few curious seconds, they would probably look away. But, what if this man had a gun? Now the threat would appear imminent. Everyone in the station, including the researcher, might be more inclined to act in some way. Clearly, the gun itself is what would make the difference in one's decision to act (whether as a researcher or simply as a human being). But online, researchers will never be able to see the literal (or metaphorical) gun. They do not have the same ability to read the environment or behaviors of a person to help contextualize the distressing disclosure.

Richard et al. (2000: 217) deliberated similar quandaries after reading the suicide ideations of a man on a multiple sclerosis listserv. They explained:

It should be noted that although the man claimed to have MS, we do not know whether he truly had this condition. However, the fact that we could not know what his status was did not eliminate our concern for his well-being and fear that other vulnerable people would be influenced by his communications. Thus, unless one chooses to disbelieve everything expressed through cybercommunication unless it is externally verified, uncertainty will

continue to exist and will influence decisions about whether and how to respond to potentially suicidal people.

The inability of online researchers to verify facts is just one of several reasons that internet researchers may simply dismiss ethical responsibilities for responding to distressing disclosure altogether. Not only is it difficult to verify the authenticity of the disclosure, but it is also hard, if not impossible in some cases, to identify who the authors actually are and where they live geographically. Without knowing this information, what course of action do researchers have? When is an ethical responsibility outweighed by the burden of action? Moreover, when does the burden end? Each of these questions points to the worthwhile consideration of a more fundamental issue . . . do researchers *ever* have an obligation to act in any way? This question prompts discussion of another ethical principle identified in the Belmont Report: beneficence.

Beneficence

In addition to respect for persons, beneficence is also a principle whose application has bearing on a researchers' responsibility when encountering distressing information online. As enumerated in the Belmont Report: 'Persons are treated in an ethical manner not only by respecting their decisions and protecting them from harm, but also by making efforts to secure their well-being.' Two distinct dilemmas arise from application of this principle to online research. First, internet researchers (as with all researchers) must determine the extent to which the principle of beneficence implies an affirmative duty to respond to distressing information. Second, in the context of internet research, the principle of beneficence appears to be somewhat at odds with the core American value of free speech. Which value should supercede the other?

Does the principle of beneficence extend an affirmative duty? A basic issue confronting any researcher, online or offline, is whether or not the ethical principle of beneficence incorporates an affirmative duty. 'Beneficence' has been interpreted differently by various researchers. Some contend that when we refer to beneficence in research, we mean 'not harming' those we study. This implies that a researcher should take precautions to prevent their research from harming participants. For example, online researchers have questioned how their identification of online subjects in publications might affect those subjects (King, 1996; Waskul and Douglass, 1996). Others call attention to the final phrase in the Belmont Report's definition of beneficence – that researchers must not only respect people's decisions and protect them from harm, but they must also make 'efforts to secure [persons'] well-being'. This interpretation implies that researchers should not only prevent any harm that might result from

their research, but they should also endeavor to protect subjects from any evident harm that might come to subjects, regardless of the source of that harm. This suggests the existence of an affirmative responsibility on the part of researchers should they encounter distressing information in their homepage research.

Rather than returning to the decades-old discussion of how the principle of beneficence should be interpreted, here we merely raise the point that how one interprets 'beneficence' will certainly have a bearing on one's decision to react to distressing information online. Considering the life-and-death nature of the distressing disclosure that researchers might encounter online, researchers might wisely look to other professions to see how they have dealt with such types of disclosure, albeit in offline – and quite different – situations. For example, those (doctors, nurses, psychologists, psychiatrists) who come into contact with suicidal people in 'real' life traditionally view the principle of beneficence as encompassing an affirmative duty to intervene in any way possible, because the risk of death is simply too serious to ignore. The questions that internet researchers might ask themselves in determining an affirmative duty to react to distressing disclosure online include: does one's role as a researcher heighten or lessen one's responsibility to act? Is there a lesser responsibility if the distressing disclosure that one encounters has nothing to do with the topic that one is studying online? What course of action is possible? One's sense of responsibility might shift with consideration of each of these questions.

Another issue that seems particularly likely to have an impact on how online researchers perceive their ethical responsibility is the situation in which distressing online disclosure appears to have been authored by, or poses a threat to, children (see Ess, 2002). Children (typically defined as 18 years or under) are commonly classified as those with 'diminished autonomy' who thus demand special attention and protection. For example, in nearly every state, laws obligate mental health professionals, social workers, and educators to report suspected cases of child abuse, even if there is no proof of maltreatment. Legal immunity is granted to those who report (in good faith) any suspected abuse or neglect (Sales and Shuman, 1996). Suicide threats are also taken seriously by the courts, who have held schools and guidance counselors liable for failing to inform the parents of students when their children are suspected of being suicidal. In *Eisel v. Board of Education*, for example, the court concluded that the problem of adolescent suicide required counselors to act, even if the risk appeared slight. They wrote:

The harm that may result from a school counselor's failure to intervene appropriately when a child threatens suicide is total and irreversible for the child, and severe for the child's family. It may be that the risk of any particular suicide is remote if statistically quantified in relation to all of the reports of

suicidal talk that are received by school counselors. We do not know. But the consequence of the risk is so great that even a relatively remote possibility of suicide may be enough to establish duty.

The court indicated that in order to fulfill this duty, the counselors simply should have telephoned the student's parents.

How does this perceived responsibility for children translate to the online research setting? What difference, if any, should it make that a child allegedly authored distressing self-disclosure, if the actual age of the author cannot be easily verified (as would be the case online)? Does one's inability to verify age relieve one from ethical responsibility? Does one have an affirmative duty to verify age before determining whether one has an affirmative duty to react to the disclosure? These are just a few of many questions that internet researchers must begin to contemplate, as more and more scholars embark on internet research to study underage populations.

Beneficence vs. freedom of speech A final reason internet researchers might consider their ethical responsibility when encountering distressing information online is the apparent conflict between two core ideals raised by such situations. One of the generally accepted values of American society is freedom of speech – the freedom to say what we want, where we want, and how we want. But we also value beneficence – at base, helping others. Internet researchers contemplating their responsibility when encountering distressing disclosure online are in a precarious position when determining which value should take precedence. Reacting to distressing online disclosure may have good results for the individual(s) involved, but at what price? For one, internet users may be less likely to express themselves on the internet for fear that their disclosure may be misinterpreted or taken more seriously than it was intended. For instance, King (1995) described a note that someone posted on the internet relaying his (understandable) frustration with being committed to a mental hospital after he 'falsely threatened to commit suicide on the internet'. The man described his state of mind when he wrote his post, saying,

Actually, I was neither ill or rational at the time. I was, however, fairly drunk and missing the woman I was involved with . . . I did not consider the consequences of posting the article because, at that time, I felt like I had complete anonymity and freedom on the net. My mistake. (King, 1995)

Moreover, because self-disclosure (whether online or offline) can serve a cathartic purpose (Pennebaker, 1990), researchers might do less harm by refraining from intervening, because some distressing disclosure online may be beneficial in and of itself. For example, angry individuals may vent their frustrations by making threats online, but this venting process itself may prevent these individuals from acting on their anger. Indeed, one adolescent

homepage author who repeatedly professed her desire to kill herself in her journal later explained, 'the only reason this page is so negative is cause i don't really feel the need to waste my time writing when i'm happy. so when i'm depressed i write that way i wont do anything stupid' (Stern, 2002b). Clinical psychologists have noted the therapeutic value of writing, often encouraging people to keep diaries and/or journals to help them express their emotions and concerns (Sosin, 1983). By taking all distressing disclosure seriously, researchers might undermine such cathartic enterprises, as well as the principle of free speech.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR INTERNET RESEARCHERS

The hypothetical scenarios and questions raised throughout this article illustrate the reasons why internet researchers should begin to contemplate their responsibilities for encountering distressing information online. Although the dilemmas they face are in many ways similar to those faced by offline researchers, online researchers are presented with a unique set of circumstances that warrants special attention. Online researchers must not only decide (most likely on a case-by-case basis) if the distressing information that they encounter online demands a response, but they must also determine whether such a response is even possible. Some of the issues raised here, for example, suggest that even decidedly ethical actions may not be feasible ones.

Despite the absence of absolutes or solutions to these dilemmas, the discussion raised here aims to heighten researchers' awareness of the complex situations posed by internet research. More dialogue is justified, especially in light of the recognized usefulness of internet research and the growing number of internet studies. Although specific guidelines are yet to be established, this article concludes by identifying some facets of distressing disclosures that internet researchers might usefully consider when determining the best course of action.

- (1) Researchers should be sensitive to the possibility of encountering distressing information online, particularly if they are studying deviant or high-risk populations. Similar advice was provided to mental health professionals by Richard et al. (2000: 227) who wrote:

[C]linicians who use the internet for entertainment or to inform their practices should anticipate internet encounters with distressed people and consider responses that demonstrate concern for human suffering without unintentionally expanding the boundaries of professional and legal obligation . . .

Such awareness should, at the very least, prompt researchers to develop a plan for the way in which they will handle distressing disclosures. For example, researchers might email to distressed

individuals the URL of a website that links to relevant, helpful resources.

- (2) In determining how they will handle distressing disclosure, researchers should consider its context. That is, where was the disclosure found? On a homepage, in a newsgroup post, in a chatroom? Moreover, what is the nature of that setting, and what does that setting suggest about the gravity with which researchers should regard the information? For example, King (1995: 5) explained that the location where he found a suicide note online greatly influenced the seriousness with which he perceived it. A suicide note on a bulletin board specifically designated to the topic of depression was much less likely to be dismissed than a note that 'in some other way appeared completely out of context to the topic under discussion'. The Association of Internet Researchers similarly suggest that the venue under study should be evaluated in order to determine the types of ethical expectations that it establishes (e.g. policy statements on a website notifying users that the site is public) (see Ess, 2002).
- (3) Researchers should consider the 'level of anonymity' (King, 1995) of the discloser. Is a real name provided? How much background information is given? For example, research on adolescents' homepages indicated that many teens provide real names, locations and ages (Stern, 1999, 2002a, 2002b). Not only does this type of information signal possible avenues for responding to distressing disclosure, but it might also alert researchers to special instances that warrant extra attention (e.g. if someone who details suicide plans is a child.)
- (4) Researchers should consider the timeliness of the distressing disclosure. Although homepages have the potential to be up-to-date documents, they can also be abandoned artifacts that have been sitting untouched online for years. Most software (such as Netscape's 'Page Info' option under the 'View' command) allows a researcher to determine the last time that a web page has been updated. This issue may be less problematic for researchers studying newsgroups and bulletin boards, where information about the time and date of the post is recorded as part of the communication, or in chatrooms or multi-user domains, where the interaction is in real time. As a general rule of thumb, the more timely a disclosure, the more impact researchers are likely to have should they decide to act in some way.
- (5) Finally, and perhaps most importantly, researchers should investigate what other researchers – whether online or offline –

have done in similar situations. Each discipline and professional community has its own stories and philosophies. All researchers would wisely consult with colleagues to determine the most ethical and feasible course of action.

Note

- 1 Web rings interlink a series of individual WWW sites to one another. Visitors who happen onto a site in a web ring need only click on the ring's icon to be carried to a site similar to its predecessors (Basch, 1998). Anyone can create a web ring and link others to the ring by using the appropriate HTML code.

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