

GUIDANCE DOCUMENT FOR CONDUCTING INTERNET RESEARCH

Online platforms and online communities are widely used by researchers as rich sources of research data. Given the increasing value of user generated data available on internet-based communities, researchers must give consideration to the potential ethical and legal challenges that may arise as a result of collecting and using data available online.

This Guidance Document is for UCC researchers conducting internet research.¹

Do I need Ethics approval for Internet Research?

You need ethics approval for internet research in all situations where the research involves human participants whether through web surveys; accessing or utilising data (information) about/generated by the participant/s; or observing human participants in their online interactions/behaviour.

Where do I apply for Approval for Internet Research Ethics Approval?

Applications for ethics approval for internet research are made to the Social Research Ethics Committee: see <https://www.ucc.ie/en/research/about/ethics/>

What Ethical Factors should I take into account in formulating Internet Research?

As part of the social research ethics approval process at University College Cork, we recommend that the researcher (and the research team members) consider the following questions while completing their application for ethics approval:

Intrusiveness—Will the proposed research be intrusive to the online community? Will you be a “passive” participant in the community versus will you be actively involved in the community by participating in communications with other group members?

¹ According to Association of Internet Researchers (2012) internet research -

- a) utilizes the internet to collect data or information, e.g., through online interviews, surveys, archiving, or automated means of data scraping;
- b) studies how people use and access the internet, e.g., through collecting and observing activities or participating on social network sites, listservs, web sites, blogs, games, virtual worlds, or other online environments or contexts;
- c) utilizes or engages in data processing, analysis, or storage of datasets, databanks, and/or repositories available via the internet.
- d) studies software, code, and internet technologies
- e) examines the design or structures of systems, interfaces, pages, and elements
- f) employs visual and textual analysis, semiotic analysis, content analysis, or other methods of analysis to study the web and/or internet-facilitated images, writings, and media forms.

studies large scale production, use, and regulation of the internet by governments, industries, corporations, and military forces.

<p>Perceived privacy— What is the level of perceived privacy of the online community? Is it a closed group requiring registration? What is the membership size? What are the group norms? Has the website/online platform a privacy (or data protection) notice for the site which the researcher will need to be cognisant of when using?</p>
<p>Vulnerability—How vulnerable is the online community you intend to research? For example, a mailing list of children under the age of 18 or a group of adults with an intellectual disability would be considered a vulnerable community. Other communities e.g. people with illnesses; people encountering economic difficulties may in some circumstances be considered a vulnerable community.</p>
<p>Potential harm—Has the intrusion of the researcher or publication of research results the potential to harm individuals or the online community as a whole?</p>
<p>Informed consent—Is informed consent from community members required or can it be waived? If it is required how will it be obtained?</p>
<p>Confidentiality—How can the anonymity and confidentiality of participants be protected (if verbatim quotes are given originators can be identified easily using search engines, thus informed consent is always required).</p>
<p>Consultation – Prior to submitting your application for ethical approval, have you communicated with the internet community owners/members? Considering the nature of your research, is this a prerequisite for commencing your study?</p>
<p>Platform/Community Knowledge – Have you read the Terms of Use of the online community/internet site? Do you feel you need to seek permission to conduct research on the site? If so, have you obtained permission to conduct research on this site?</p>
<p>Data Acquisition – Are you using data scraping techniques to acquire data from an online community or internet site? Have you received permission from the site owners or site users to acquire this data? Is the data acquisition method you are using considered ethical i.e. are you using approved APIs to acquire data from the internet site? Have you checked (and can you comply with) the website terms and conditions?</p>

Table 1. Decision Making Tool for Conducting Ethical Internet Research (Adapted from Eysenbach & Till, 2001)

The framework illustrated in Table 1 should be used as a decision-making tool to inform the researcher (and the research team) of the potential ethical issues arising from conducting internet research. This framework should be considered as flexible, as the technology and related regulations continue to change so too will the ethical frameworks for conducting internet research (cf. Townsend and Wallace, 2016).

It is the responsibility of the researcher to ask sensible questions about the ethical implications of conducting internet research prior to commencing a research project. If in doubt, when completing an application for SREC approval do not hesitate to contact the Social Research Ethics Committee UCC with relevant queries.

References

Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research: Recommendations from the AOIR Ethics Committee Approved by the Ethics Working Committee (Version 2.0), 08/2012. Endorsed by the AOIR Executive Committee, 09/2012. Approved by the AOIR general membership, 12/2012

Eysenbach, G., & Till, J. E. (2001). Ethical issues in qualitative research on internet communities. *BMJ : British Medical Journal*, 323(7321), 1103–1105.

Townsend, L. and Wallace, C. (2016). Social media research: A guide to ethics. Available at: http://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_487729_en.pdf.