

Making ethical decisions in an online context:

Reflections on using blogs to explore narratives of experience

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‘Framing the Gap Year: Distinction, Difference and Identity Work in Online Travel Narratives’

- UK students taking time out between school and university overseas
- Narratives presented in 39 online travel journals / blogs alongside qualitative interviews with bloggers
- Educational rite of passage; cultural trope of ‘finding oneself’ – a process of self-development; becoming a ‘global citizen’.

Structural inequalities were implicated in how stories were ‘framed’:

- Hierarchies of taste
- Inequalities of access
- Power relationships with host communities

Debates in online research ethics

- A relatively new (and changing) research environment
- Medium itself is formative and new phenomena are emerging
- New dilemmas:
 - ‘... the ability of both researchers and their subjects to assume anonymous or pseudoanonymous [sic] identities online, the complexities of obtaining informed consent, the often exaggerated expectations, if not the illusion, of privacy in cyberspace, and the blurred distinction between public and private domains’ (Frankel and Siang 1999: 1-2).
- Are new ethical procedures required?
- Or should fundamental principles remain unchanged?

Key decisions

- Were the gap year blogs public or private?
- Were the gap year bloggers subjects or authors?
- Issues of
 - Informed consent
 - Privacy
 - Anonymity

Blogs as public or private

- Defining public/private online
- Web 2.0 complicated this further
 - Part of wider shifts in sense and values of privacy (Beer and Burrows 2007).
- Accessible and in the public arena, but:
 - An unequal power relationship
 - Not the intended audience
 - Expectations of privacy
- Difference between technological and psychological privacy (Frankel and Siang 1999).
- Also a difference between natural and normative privacy (Moor 2004).

Expectations of privacy and personal information

- Evidence of user perceptions of privacy:
 - Bloggers losing their jobs (Viegas 2005)
 - Personal information revealed on teenage blogs / social networks (Huffaker 2006)
- Gap year sample often contained full name, personal photographs, email address, intimate reflections...
- Responsibility to protect personal information in the public domain?
- Publically accessible – no reasonable expectation that others should protect information (Wilkinson and Thelwall 2011)?

Bloggers as subjects or authors

- A 'person in space' or a text with a 'person as author' (Ess and AoIR 2002)?
- Defining a subject:
'...a living individual about whom an investigator... conducting research obtains data through intervention or interaction with the individual, or identifiable private information' (Frankel and Siang 1999: 16).
- All bloggers contacted for interview
- Traceability of online data complicates anonymity
- Ownership of material
 - Cultural production of texts and acknowledging authorship (Bassett and O'Riordan 2002)
 - Copyright issues?
- Implications for informed consent
 - Consent not required for published material
 - Contact itself may be intrusive

How to reconcile?

- Choice between preserving anonymity or credit bloggers for work
 - Tension between acknowledging authorship and protecting identity (Hookway 2008).
- Setting-dependent approach and sensitivity to context
- Bruckman (2002): 'continuum of possibilities' for level of disguise :
 - No disguise, light disguise, moderate disguise, to heavy disguise.
- Whiteman (2007): awareness of unknown readers?
- 'Err on the side of caution' (BSA 2002)

My approach:

- Concern with representations of experience in communications, not subjects
 - Informed consent not required
- Indications of unknown readers / public nature of blog
 - From blogs themselves
 - From interviews with a subset of the bloggers
- Blogs personal, but not private

My approach:

- Did not 'cite' blogs
 - Imposes 'offline' considerations of authorship and public content into online spaces
 - Personal details
- 'Moderate disguise' (Bruckman 2002)
 - Verbatim quotations
 - Names, pseudonyms, identifiable details changed
- Privileging protection of identity over providing credit to authors (Hookway 2008)

Did I do the right thing?

- Should I have used the blogs without consent?
- Should I have provided links to the blogs?
- Should I have paraphrased the blogs, rather than quote them?
- Should I have not contacted the bloggers at all?
- Did I end up with an unsatisfactory middle ground?

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