



Online Ethics Center  
FOR ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE

# Ethical Issues in Incorporating Online Information with Interview-Based Research

## Year

2006

## Description

When performing research on friend networks on social media sites, what kinds of protections should researchers use to protect the privacy of their research subjects?

## Body

### Part 1

Marie Smith, a PhD student, is conducting dissertation research about women's friendships in college and how friendships influence women's academic and intellectual lives. As part of the project, she interviewed over 80 undergraduate women at a large, public university. The interviews include collecting data from the students about their friends (e.g., who their friends are, where they live, and what their majors are if they are in college) and the relationships among their friends. At the end of the interview, she asks each participant if they would like a copy of a published paper that comes from the research; most students request one and many seem excited that their stories will be read by others and used to help reach better understandings of friendships and college life. She has approval from her

university's IRB for these activities and to conduct follow-up interviews with students.

During the first months of interviewing, students frequently mention a website where they chat with friends, where they post information about themselves (such as their classes, where they live, their favorite books, movies & quotes, and a photo) and where "friends" can mutually select each other to add to their social network and talk to each other online. Several women suggest that Marie look at this website because it was a way they did some things discussed in the interview (e.g., keeping in touch with friends, making new connections with people, and finding students in their class to study with, ask questions to, or get notes from). One interview participant in particular, "Jane," is surprised that Marie has not seen the website and is adamant that Marie pay attention to this website because she sees it as an important part of friendship at the university. Jane further encourages Marie to get on the website by telling her that she should look up Jane's friends because they have lots of postings about school and friendships.

After the interview with Jane, Marie attempts to view this website and discovers that she must register for the site in order to be able to view people's profiles on the site. She registers and sets up a profile for herself with very limited information (i.e., her name and status as a graduate student) and makes it viewable to the public. On the site, individuals can choose to allow anyone to view their profile or they can restrict who can see their name on searches, who can see their profile, and what aspects of the profile they can see (and they can also block individual people from viewing their profile). After Marie sets up her profile, she searches the site for Jane and finds her profile and those of her friends, and the information seems to confirm what Jane told her during the interview.

## Questions

1. Was it appropriate for Marie to register for the website so that she could view the site and better understand this aspect of students' friendships for her dissertation research? Would it have been responsible for her to ignore this website given that students stressed its importance for their friendships and college experiences, topics which are central to her research?
2. Was it appropriate for Marie to look up Jane's profile on the website and to compare this Internet information to the data collected during the interview?
3. Was it appropriate for Marie to view the profiles of Jane's friends (most of

whom Marie has not interviewed)?

## Part 2

Over the next few months as she is interviewing, Marie continues to browse this website, viewing profiles of women she interviews as well as others students from the college. During the interviews, she does not tell her participants that she has looked at the website unless they ask; when asked, she informs students that she has seen it. Marie gives a presentation on her dissertation data at a conference and decides not to use any of the information from this website in order to preserve participants' confidentiality. Her dissertation committee members encourage her to include information available from the website in her dissertation. She is getting ready to write her dissertation chapters and is not sure how much of information from the Internet profiles to include, if any.

Using direct quotations and/or photographs students have posted could identify students and does not seem like the ethical thing to do. Marie feels that this issue takes on added importance because she has confidential data from her interviews that if presented alongside information from the same person's Internet profile, would identify her participants to anyone who wanted to search the website for the information from students' profiles. Marie wonders if the potential benefits to her participants and social science research are greater than the potential costs of identifying individual students. As she volunteered to give participants copies of a published paper from the research and some of her participants are friends with each other, Marie feels that her participants may be able to identify others in the findings and discover confidential information if interview data is linked to quotations (or other identifying information) from the website. She is considering paraphrasing the information from the website (including the students' favorite movies, quotes, etc., and their number of friends) so that the main points from the profile will be conveyed without identifying individual students. Pseudonyms — for students, their friends, and other identifying information such as the names of organizations they belong to — are used throughout all written and oral reports about the project.

Marie decides to file an amendment to her original proposal to the IRB asking to include data from this website, excluding any identifying information, in her

project. She also proposes to use only information from the website that students have chosen to make publicly available. The IRB approves her request.

## Questions

4. What precautions should Marie take in giving presentations on and writing about this data?
5. Are Marie's efforts to remove identifying information from the students' profiles and paraphrase this information enough protection to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of her interview participants? If not, what else should she do?
6. By removing and paraphrasing information from students' profiles, is she fudging or misusing data? Is it more important to preserve the accuracy of the data or respondents' privacy in this situation? What else could Marie do so that she does not misrepresent the information on her participants' profiles?
7. Should she identify the specific website from which she got this information (which she has IRB approval for) or should she describe the genre of the site from which it came without identifying the specific site (as was done in this case study)?
8. Should Marie have asked her interview participants for their explicit permission for her to include paraphrased Internet data from their profiles in her research? Why or why not? If she would have asked participants for their permission for this at the outset of the research, would their consent be truly informed as much of what Marie was looking for regarding the profiles is unknown at this point of the research? In other words, how can Marie act most ethically in this situation given that the risks of the research were not fully known to her at the start of her research?
9. If the potential costs of the research are greater than the benefits, one option would be to use information from students' profiles on the website without linking any of this online information to specific participants in her research. Is this a better alternative? Why or why not? If so, is it more ethical to use direct quotations or paraphrased information from the website in this situation?
10. Is it unethical of Marie to have filed an IRB amendment for approval for something she already had been doing (i.e., viewing information on the website about her interview participants) for months? If so, what should she have done differently?

## Part 3

Marie has sought to incorporate feminist methodology into her research design, methods, and dissemination plans. Feminist methodology seeks to reduce the distance between researcher and subject as well as to give back to research participants (Reinharz 1992). In line with these goals, Marie decided to offer each participant a copy of her transcript and interview recording as well as a copy of a published paper that comes out of the research. A few participants requested a copy of their transcripts and interview recordings; Marie gave these to the participants after the interviews were transcribed. Nearly all participants requested a copy of a published paper. Although Marie is glad to be able to give a little something back to her participants who have given her so much by sharing their experiences with her, this has added some additional ethical complications to the study. While it is always a good —and ethical — practice to assume that your participants will have access to any published results from the study, it seems to be unusual that most participants actually see the write-up. Marie's fear is that participants, particularly those who are friends with each other, will be able to identify one another. If they can identify others in the research, they may also uncover information about individuals that they would not know if they had not read the research. If this were to happen, the confidentiality she promised her research participants would be breached.

She plans to publish several papers based on this research. Rather than give each participant the same paper, Marie is considering spending time selecting a paper for each individual that shows their contribution to the research while minimizing the contributions of their friends, if possible. The extra time spent seems worth the protection it will provide to respondents' confidentiality.

On the other hand, Marie wonders if it would, perhaps, be easier and also an ethical position to not send papers to her participants at all unless they contact her about it.

11. What are Marie's obligations to her participants who requested a copy of a published paper of the research when Marie offered it to them?
12. What are Marie's obligations to protecting the confidentiality of the participants in her research? Should Marie's desire to protect her

participants' confidentiality override her promise to her provide a copy of a published paper to those who requested one?

13. Are Marie's obligations to her participants different given that nearly all of them will be given a copy of published results from the study? In other words, should Marie do anything differently in this case than in a normal study, where participants are able to locate a copy of the published results themselves? If so, what should she do differently and why?

## References

Reinharz, Shulamit. 1992. *Feminist Methods in Social Research*. New York: Oxford University Press.

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Graduate Research Ethics: Cases and Commentaries - Volume 7, 2006

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Association for Practical and Professional Ethics (APPE)

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