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Qualitative Online Data Collection

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Abstract

This paper offers an ethical framework to guide decision-making when using online methods to collect qualitative data. With the introduction of the internet, a range of new ways to collect data have emerged, each of which involves sets of ethical issues and concerns. From a review of these concerns, the paper presents a framework that may facilitate decision-making when faced with ethical challenges. The framework is based on reviews of three internet-mediated qualitative methods used to collect qualitative data on human life and behavior: online interviews, online focus groups, and online observation. Based on his review, a conceptual framework is developed. The framework conceptualizes ethical decision making as (a) situational, (b) casuistic, (c) reflexive, and (d) phronetic.

Qualitative Online Data Collection:
Towards a Framework of Ethical Decision-Making

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This paper offers an ethical framework to guide decision-making when using online methods to collect qualitative data. With the introduction of the internet, a range of new ways to collect data have emerged, each of which involves sets of ethical issues and concerns. From a review of these concerns, the paper presents a framework that may facilitate decision-making when faced with ethical challenges. The framework is based on reviews of three internet-mediated qualitative methods used to collect qualitative data on human life and behavior: online interviews, online focus groups, and online observation. Based on his review, a conceptual framework is developed. The framework conceptualizes ethical decision making as (a) situational, (b) casuistic, (c) reflexive, and (d) phronetic.

Keywords: internet-mediated qualitative research, ethical decision-making, framework

The profound digital transformations of our time provide new opportunities and challenges for the human and social scientists in their efforts to explore and widen understandings of human thought and behavior in contemporary societies in ethically-sound ways (Casey et al., 2018). A wide range of technologies and online platforms have enabled people to communicate and share information via the internet, and this development has a significant impact on qualitative researchers as they are now able to access and collect data in completely new ways (Akemu & Abdelnour, 2020).

In general, online qualitative data collection is more cost-effective than data collection in the physical world and allows researchers to reach participants and populations that have been difficult to engage in research using traditional data collecting strategies (Im & Chee, 2006; Sveningsson, 2003). Moreover, recently, the coronavirus (COVID-19) emerging in Wuhan, China in December 2019, which caused a massive global societal lockdown, has stimulated qualitative researchers to seek innovative online forms of data collecting (Lupton, 2021; Tremblay et al., 2021) that come with distinct sets of ethical challenges (Phenwan et al., 2021). Thus, the use of online data collection has become more and more popular among qualitative researchers and many *new* methods have emerged under headings such as *online ethnography* (Correll, 1995), *cyberethnography* (Robinson & Schulz, 2009), *internet ethnography* (Sade-Bek, 2004), *digital ethnography* (Murthy, 2008), and *netnography* (Kozinets, 2010).

While there has been some discussion of ethics in relation to digital methods in qualitative research (Hennel et al., 2020; Kozinets 2010; Paulus et al., 2014), the ethical frameworks that may inform the choices and practices of qualitative researchers using online data collection methods have been largely unaddressed in the literature. There have been discussions of how paradigms of philosophical ethics such as deontology, feminist ethics, utilitarianism etc. may apply to online research (Ess, 2002), but currently there have been no attempts to present an integrated ethical framework that synthesizes different principles and applies to internet-mediated qualitative research. In this article, I will present a framework for

ethical decision-making for qualitative researchers using internet-mediated methods. I will do so by reviewing the ethical challenges pertaining to online interviewing, online focus groups, and online observation.

From my experience, from teaching qualitative methods in sociology courses, from my discussions with colleagues, and from reviewing and screening qualitative research proposals for ethical issues, there is a need for ethical frameworks that can guide students' and researchers' ethical considerations and choices when they use internet-mediated qualitative research methods. Additionally, there are some indications that only small proportions of studies using internet-mediated qualitative methods refer to ethical guidelines when discussing ethical issues (Tuikka et al., 2017). My intention here is to offer a framework that may serve as a starting point for ethical reflections for students and researchers applying internet-mediated qualitative methods.

Literature Review

Online Research: The Sufficience of Traditional Ethical Guidelines?

As qualitive researchers have adopted online data collection methods, ethical issues have been the subject of more and more attention (Franzke et al., 2020). There is a growing body of literature comprising journal articles (Kinder-Kurlanda & Weller, 2020; Palys & Atchison, 2012; Pentzold, 2017; Williams, 2012), dedicated handbooks (Hunsinger et al., 2020), book chapters (Ess & Jones, 2004; Eynon et al., 2017; Tiidenberg, 2020), and some book-length volumes (Dreyfus, 2001) addressing ethical aspects and challenges in research on the internet (for an extensive overview, see Christensen & Larsen, 2020). Some authors argue that online research raises a new set of ethical issues that do not find analogs in other forms of inquiry (Frankl & Siang, 1999; Garcia et al., 2009; Hine, 2013; Markham & Buchanan, 2015; Thomas, 1996; Williams, 2012) and that further clarification of the ethics of online research is needed (Hewson & Laurent, 2008). However, others have argued that online research does not pose issues or call for ethical concerns that are different from those found in offline research (Rodham & Gavin, 2006; Walther, 2002). In this paper, I take the perspective that qualitative online research raises some issues that are quite distinct from those experienced in the physical world while, at the same time, this type of research will involve issues that resemble those encountered in offline settings. Thus, there is no need for a completely new set of internet-mediated research ethics, but rather, for one that takes into consideration the novel issues and dilemmas encountered by qualitative internet researchers while building on and deriving from traditional research ethics.

Ethical Issues in Qualitative Online Data Collection

Discussions in the research community center around questions such as informed consent, anonymity (Rodham & Gavin, 2006), and the differentiation between private and public data (Sugiura et al., 2017). According to Kozinets (2010) and Zimmer (2010), the most important ethical question is: are online communities private or public spaces? The quick answer is that "it depends." It depends on the expectations of the communities, and sometimes boundaries between public and private can become increasingly blurred. Although participants in internet forums often perceive their posts as private (Mckee & Porter, 2009), in some contexts such as news groups for organ-transplant recipients described by Koufaris (2001), very private and detailed information is made public and shared with all with an interest, while participants in other forums claim their contributions, postings, and presentations to be private material (Garcia et al., 2009).

Furthermore, it has been argued that the public/private binary does reflect the complexity by which information of people flows on the internet and that researchers should pay attention to how people relate to their information in specific contexts (Markham & Buchanan, 2015). Other relevant questions raised by Reid (1996) and Kozinets (2010) concern how informed consent can be obtained from online community members, how researchers can be certain of the true identities of those who provide consent or determine who owns the data on blogs or new forums, or if distinct ethical rules apply for different online media. Specifically, it is increasingly important to ask to what extent those who provide personal information in publicly accessible sites on the internet are comfortable with such information being used in research projects (Markham & Buchanan, 2015).

Finally, it is evident that foundational principles laid out in documents and declarations aiming at protecting human subjects in research such as the Declaration of Helsinki (1964) and Belmont Report (1979) need some operationalization to address the ethical challenges faced by researchers. To this end, some scholars (such as Markham & Buchanan, 2015) have suggested that internet contexts present some very crucial dilemmas for social researchers as it becomes increasingly complicated to assess or determine whether: (a) the research involves human subjects or not, (b) issues of privacy are at stake, (c) when and why consent is to be gained, and (d) how personally identifiable information can be protected. Thus, by acknowledging the complexities in ethical decision-making that follow from the acceleration of technological development and use of information technologies, discussions of internet research ethics (Burles & Bally, 2018; Ess, 2002) have highlighted the need for broad "recipes" in ethical decision-making and for recognition of the difficulties in deducting ethically sound judgments from general rules.

Research Organizations and Institutional Measures

The increasing use of internet-mediated qualitative methods calls for ethical discussions among researchers, research institutions, and funding agencies on how to conduct internet-mediated research while protecting human subjects. Some academic associations such as the *Association of Internet Researchers* (AoIR), *The British Psychological Society* (2017), *The British Sociological Association* (2016), and national authorities such as *The Norwegian National Research Ethics Committee* (2021), and specialized research journals (e.g., *International Journal of Internet Research Ethics*) have provided forums for discussion and developed ethical guidelines that address issues pertaining to internet research. The term *internet research* is often used as a unifying topic for discussing ethical issues and how to handle them (Fossheim & Ingierd, 2015), and many discussions of the related ethical issues are general in nature, aiming to address a wide range of diverse data collecting methods. Thus, there has been little systematic discussion of the ethical issues pertaining to specific qualitative internet research methods, with Buchanan (2004) as a notable exception.

In addition, in many universities and research institutions, institutional review boards (IRBs) have been designed with the aim to review and guide researchers and to accommodate protocols in applying internet-mediated qualitative research methods. Furthermore, the approval of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which harmonizes European data protection laws, has set new standards for all member states of the European Union regarding the protection of EU citizens' data privacy. In addition to the ethical codes and declarations, some scholars (Markham & Buchanan, 2015; Pace & Livingston, 2005) have provided guidelines that may facilitate ethical judgments in internet research. As we will later discuss, although such guidelines may function as important guiding frames in ethical decision-making, they cannot stand alone and will always have to be applied to specific situational challenges. Furthermore, controversies over the right courses of ethical sound actions still exist, and basic

ethical practices such as securing anonymization may be very hard to guarantee due to the traceability of online data (Sugiura et al., 2017).

Ethical challenges in internet-mediated research vary along several parameters, and an essential one concerns the specific data collection method(s). While there are some crosscutting and general ethical challenges that apply to a variety of data-collecting methods, some ethical challenges derive directly from specific data collection practices. Thus, to illustrate the significant ethical challenges of internet-mediated qualitative research, we will explore three online qualitative data collection methods: online interviewing, online focus groups, and online observation.

1. Online Interviewing

Broadly speaking, interviews using the internet and internet technologies may divide into two major communication categories: interviews based on *synchronous communication* and interviews based on *asynchronous communication,* the latter involving distinct ethical challenges due to the lack of visual contact. Interviews using synchronous communication come close to live interviews, allowing for the researcher to adjust to the participant's immediate verbal and non-verbal reactions, and recent research on the use of video conferencing platforms (Gray et al., 2020) has shown that participants may be comfortable speaking about personal topics in their own convenient space and may even feel personally connected with their interviewer. Whereas interviews based on synchronous communication occur in real time, interviews based on asynchronous communication are conducted via emails, blogs, or other platforms in which researcher and participant exchange information within a certain time frame (Ratislavova & Ratislav, 2014; Redlich-Amirav & Higginbottom, 2014). This method is often less labor- and resource-intensive compared to face-to-face interviews and it has proven efficient in establishing contact with participants that (due to logistics, vulnerability, etc.), would have declined participation in synchronous online interviews or physical face-to-face interviews. One of the major advantages of asynchronous interviews is that this form allows participants time to reflect on issues and themes and therefore often produce rich and detailed data, while on the other hand, the asynchronous communication form disrupts the conversational flow found in synchronous interviewing (Hewson & Laurent, 2008). Today, many services are available for conducting asynchronous interviews such as traditional email or Protonmail. In asynchronous interviewing, several issues regarding harm to participants may arise. Due to the lack of audio and visual contact, the researcher is blocked from social cues and certain forms of information on the psychological reactions of participants to interview questions and themes. In asynchronous interviewing, therefore, it may be difficult to evaluate the impact of the interview on the participant's psychological well-being. In other words, the technological platforms that facilitate asynchronous interviewing create a distance or informational barrier between researcher and participant that may hinder necessary and important assessment of the participant's reactions to the interview situation. This barrier may prevent the researcher from making appropriate adjustments during the interview and complicate protective debriefing as participants may leave the virtual interview situation with a mouse click or just simply finish the dialogue without further notice or warning (Pace & Livingston, 2005).

Addressing the complications arising from the lack of physical face-to-face contact in interviews based on asynchronous communication involves several measures, including the provision of detailed information of interview themes and debriefing frames before interviews start. In addition to the challenges related to the lack of physical face-to-face contact, asynchronous interviewing carries the potential risk of messages being intercepted by or directed to someone other than the intended receiver. Accordingly, such data security risks

should be openly acknowledged, and the researcher should take measures to secure her data in secure repositories.

2. *Online Focus Groups*

In recent years, there have been some attempts to form and use online focus groups to study various phenomena involving both asynchronous and synchronous forms of communication. As in individual online interviews, online focus groups can be facilitated by various digital resources such as chat clients (synchronous) or email lists (asynchronous). As pointed out by Gaiser (2008), some of the benefits of conducting focus groups in online settings are that they are often inexpensive, they may provide greater and faster access to a broad range of participants, and they may allow for a more specific framing of research questions, thus limiting researcher bias. While focus groups have traditionally been guided directly by a moderator making use of the interactional dynamics evolving in the process of communication, online focus groups are characterized by a set of practical and ethical issues.

Online focus groups involve some unique issues that warrant attention. Some of these concerns have been highlighted by Stewart and Williams (2005). First, researchers would need to acquaint themselves with the netiquette or the informal codes that define appropriate behavior when interacting through internet-mediated services. Second, and pertaining to securing anonymity and confidentiality, researchers planning to conduct online focus groups should observe that "the risk of deductive disclosure is very real in research in computerized settings" (Stewart & Williams, 2005, p. 411). In other words, as all participants will have access to the entire data material and as users of the internet always leave a digital footprint, participants should be informed that full and total anonymity is difficult to achieve in internet-mediated communications. In addition, obtaining informed consent from participants in an online focus group at the time of the group session may be difficult to achieve. Therefore, it is advised to use a conference platform that allows for sharing information about the study to be read and agreed upon ahead of the interview (Brownlow & O'Dell, 2002).

As moderation and informal bonding often relies on situational or non-verbal cues, establishing a mutual trust may be challenging in asynchronous online focus groups. This particular concern is somewhat different in online focus groups compared to physical focus groups, as the absence of nonverbal signs and feedback from the participants may lead some participants to perceive anonymity and thus to "reveal embarrassing details" (Abrams & Gaiser, 2017, p. 447). Furthermore, the grounding of the focus group in an online environment does itself pose an ethical challenge, as the researcher is not able to control how the data is used, saved, and circulated, which is why it is advised to state in the informed consent form that participants should refrain from doing their own recording (Abrams & Gaiser (2017). As indicated, an important ethical issue using online focus groups concerns computer security, and more specifically, the protection of privacy. In a study among cancer patients using online focus groups, Im and Chee (2006) provided insight into how maintaining the group's confidentiality and security was challenged while collecting data. Due to several hacking attempts, they found it necessary to update the software regularly.

3. *Online Observation*

Online observation involves observing behaviors on the internet, recording these behaviors, and using them as data in research. Online observation can involve different levels of structure. In unstructured observation, the researcher seeks to uncover the nuances of meaning in the behavior of social actors in an online environment, whereas in structured observation the researcher is more concerned with registering the frequency of online actions

(Nørskov & Rask, 2011). Similar online observation can take the form of participant observation, as when the researcher interacts directly with actors in specific online communities and thereby enables data elicited from participants in response to the researcher's actions. Online observation can also be unobtrusive when the researcher observes and collects information from social media platforms, websites, online forums, etc. (Salmons, 2015).

Depending on the specific form of online observation, this method can involve several ethical challenges. First, researchers doing online observation may cause harm to participants if their published results include information that enables identification of online participants and perhaps leads to unwelcome attention, risk of embarrassment, reputational damage, or even physical harm (Hennel et al., 2020; Townsend & Wallace, 2016). Thus, the protection of the privacy and anonymity of participants is also an important ethical issue that calls for special attention. In many internet forums, chatrooms, etc., people use pseudonyms to protect their identities. The question is, however, whether the online observer could use these online pseudonyms while reporting the data. Again, there is no universal answer. In some contexts, online pseudonyms may be impossible for others to connect to real identities, while in others it will be possible, by way of simple google searches, to identify the person behind the pseudonym (Garcia et al., 2009) which may call for a change of online pseudonyms to protect participants' privacy.

On the other hand, as pointed out by Sveningsson (2003), in some internet contexts, usernames and pseudonyms may constitute an important part of the actual data as conversations often contain important references to user's nicknames and therefore much meaning can be lost if user's nicknames are omitted in quotes from the actual data. This is particularly true in research projects that explore self-presentational issues in certain internet environments (Sveningsson, 2003). These traceability issues are highly prevalent when observing social media behavior, which has led some researchers to paraphrase names, places, and even content which does not guarantee anonymity as traceability can be enhanced by metadata incorporated in images that are less conducive to alterations by the researcher (Hennel et al., 2020).

As it appears, informed consent is a crucial issue in studying virtual communities on the internet observing interactions in online forums or using the publicly available records of such communities. To prevent psychological harm to participants, King (1996) has suggested how guidelines from professional associations can be applied to the study of internet communities. Specifically, King proposes the constructs of "group accessibility" (the public/private nature of the actual cyberspace occupied by a group) and "perceived privacy" (the level of privacy that group members assume they have) as essential dimensions when evaluating the ethically justifiable reporting of research findings (King, 1996, p. 126).

As pointed out by Garcia et al. (2009), ethical issues concerning the boundaries between public and private online spaces are also relevant when using archived data and where there is no consensus as to whether specific internet sites should be perceived as public or private. Recognizing this lack of universal guideline, some advice for online observers in making ethical decisions when trying to get access to archived materials would be to "[learn] the norms of behavior in the specific environment they are studying" (Garcia et al., 2009, p. 75) or to "echo the interactional logic of the community/platform" (Tiidenberg, 2020, p. 577). Similarly, and respecting netiquette principles, "permission from discussion-group moderators should always be sought prior to posting participation requests" (Hewson & Laurent, 2008, p. 69). Respecting the netiquette is, accordingly, also relevant in those cases in which the researcher intends to actively interact with online community members as part of the research. However, as pointed out by Corrêa and Rozados (2017), adopting ethical standards of the digital environment may catalyze deviations from accepted ethical guidelines, while, on the other hand, adhering exclusively to such standard guidelines may prevent the researcher from getting access to relevant information.

Discussion: Towards a Framework of Ethical Decision-Making

As it appears, internet-mediated qualitative methods present researchers with a number of unique ethical challenges, with those of particular concern being: obtaining informed consent when using publicly available online material in bulletin boards, microblogs, social media groups, etc., the potential invasion of privacy, the public/private grey area, challenges to data security, the risk of deductive disclosure, the transparent nature of the internet, and traceability of online communication senders. So how, then, may we provide guidance that helps qualitative researchers using internet-based methods make ethically justifiable decisions? Generally, it appears, there are no universal answers to the concerns that may arise as the research evolves. As the previous sections have shown, concerns vary along several situationally bounded characteristics, and ethical guidelines have been provided to facilitate ethically sound practices. However, with a few exceptions, these guidelines represent *procedural ethics* that require translation to specific situations. As pointed out by Tiidenberg (2020), the problem is not the principles themselves but rather that the guidelines seem to assume that researchers are able to predict future harm and that technological developments have made full anonymity and confidentiality practically impossible. What is called for is some form of *applied ethics* that considers the specific ethical challenges and concerns that characterize a given internet-mediated qualitative research situation.

While acknowledging the need for ethical guidelines and principles, Delorme et al. (2001) and Aquirre and Hyman (2016) have emphasized the need to develop a set of practice-oriented principles of good qualitative research practice. Specifically, the second author calls for so-called professional ethics of proximity that acknowledge that all significant concerns cannot be exhaustively identified and addressed accordingly while planning the study. On the contrary, such an ethic stipulates that researchers consider what informed consent, protection of privacy, avoiding doing harm, and other important principles imply at specific stages in the research process. Similarly, participants' vulnerability may be difficult to determine from the start of a study or by way of traditional understandings and classification of participants. Thus, experiences from studies (Svedmark & Nyberg, 2009) of young people's blogging practices have indicated that it is not always possible for researchers to determine vulnerability among participants by looking at the content of blogs alone. By relying solely on this information, researchers may compromise the participant's experiences of vulnerability. By the ethical guidelines from the British Sociological Association (2016) and the Association of Internet Researchers (Markham & Buchanan, 2012), such an approach advocates a flexible, dialogical, and contextual approach using ethical principles as *guidelines* (rather than rigidly applied rules) that facilitate researcher's ethical decision-making in various contexts using different internet-mediated qualitative methods (Allen, 1996). On this basis, I suggest a tentative framework for ethical decision-making that may inform qualitative studies using internet-mediated data collection methods. This framework conceptualizes ethical decision-making as constituted by four principles: (a) situational, (b) casuistic, (c) reflexive, and (d) phronetic, each involving specific questions to be considered by the researcher (see Table 1).

Table 1. A framework for ethical decision-making

	Principle			
	Situational	Casuistic	Reflexive	Phronetic
Defining components	Each research circumstance is unique prompting	Paradigm cases or analogies framed within certain conditions are	Researcher beliefs and biases shape the research in all its stages	Doing the right things involves acting based on habituation,

	continuant reflection over ethical decisions	used as basis for ethical decision-making	and processes. Knowledge is developed through a research process.	experience and contextualized circumstances
Guiding research questions	Have all ethical triggers in all stages of the research process been considered?	Are there cases that resembles (in rules and circumstance) the case under investigation?	How does the researcher's position, interests and motivation influence ethical decisions?	What are the expectations among the people in the online environment under study?

Situational Principle

Applying the situational principle implies assuming "ethical practices that emerge from a reasoned consideration of a context's specific circumstances" (Tracy, 2010, p. 847). Therefore, researchers employing internet-mediated qualitative methods should consider that specific technologies may produce specific ethical issues and that ethical considerations should involve an interplay between ethical guides and an intimate understanding of the online environment, the technologies used, as well as the experiences of the participants (Waskul & Douglass, 1996). As with research in offline environments, in online environments, it is impossible to formulate context-independent rules on how to deal with issues like privacy, consent, anonymity, etc. For example, most researchers would probably agree that it is acceptable to use text from guest books or bulletin boards as data in a research project without seeking consent from the authors of such texts. At the same time, there are other internet media, such as in specific chatrooms, where such practice would be ethically problematic (Sveningsson, 2003). What is called for here is an active use of situational information (e.g., on the accessibility of the site, password protection, etc.) to identify the specific ethical challenges at hand. Additionally, this principle would advise that the ability to access ethical risks in response to participant needs is built into the research design allowing researchers to adapt to unforeseen situations that arise after the plan has been ethically approved (Munteanu et al., 2015). The situational principle may also call for *method-specific ethical judgment* according to which contents considered private should involve the use of an informed consent form, whereas public content could have another authorization process involving a declaration of authorization of use of information for research forwarded to the relevant media or platform (Morais et al., 2020).

The Casuistic Principle

Casuistic reasoning, or casuistry, is a case-based approach to addressing ethically challenging situations that reapplies previous experiences and problem-solving procedures to solve current challenges (Jonsen & Toulmin, 1988). Applying casuistic reasoning to solve problematic cases involves thoroughly describing the situation. This situation involves a specific value or principle at stake, such as the principle of informed consent. The case is then compared to other cases, and attempts are made to identify paradigm cases resembling the case under scrutiny (Braunack-Mayer, 2001). The paradigm case that comes closest to the case under investigation is then used to inform the ethical decision. In casuistic reasoning, the researcher's contextual reflection and practical judgment are crucial when faced with challenges where principles are not directly or easily applicable. Suppose a qualitative

researcher faces an ethical challenge involving whether to seek informed consent to use observation from a specific internet-based chatroom. Suppose they can identify cases that bear some resemblance - in terms of circumstances and value at stake - to their case. In that case, the challenges may be solved by adopting the solution chosen in the one closest to the circumstance.

Casuistic thinking does not imply, however, that ethical decision-making in this type of qualitative research ends up as particularism or situational relativism (Mckee & Porter, 2009). What is argued here is that careful consideration and acknowledgment of the particular circumstances while keeping universal or general ethical principles in mind may constitute a possible and fruitful way of ethical decision-making. In other words, qualitative researchers using internet-mediated methods need to base their endeavors on regulations that minimize harm to subjects, obtain informed consent, protect vulnerable groups, etc. Still, at the same time, their ethical reasoning can be facilitated by case-by-case judgment.

The Reflexivity Principle

Ethical decision-making calls for reflexivity because every internet-mediated qualitative research project is unique in scope, focus, and research questions (Hine, 2013). Reflexivity has to do with how the researcher evaluates and assesses the implications of their perspectives, beliefs, and biases throughout the research process. As such, reflexivity has to do with the intentional ways the researcher reflects on herself as the research instrument (Paulus et al., 2014). Reflexivity often involves responding to ethical challenges and taking a reflexive approach to questioning one's assumptions, interests, and motivations (Reid et al., 2018). In internet-mediated qualitative research, the researcher must continuously seek to balance the call for conducting high-quality research of societal importance against the obligations to protect participants and especially vulnerable groups from harm and violation of privacy.

In some cases, the researcher may do right in setting aside principles of informing participants engaging in internet activities that they are being studied. In contrast, in others, such a decision may harm both participants and the reputation of the research community (Sveningsson, 2003). In this sense, ethical decision-making will involve teleological or consequentialist reasoning and may be facilitated by what has been termed "ethically important moments" (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004, p. 261).

The Phronetic Principle

The phronetic principle, sometimes referred to as practical wisdom, rests on the Aristotelian ethics stating that making right ethical decisions for the right reasons at the right time is a matter of judgement and of determining which elements of general rules apply to the situation at hand (Ess, 2002). To perform such practical wisdom entails using one's capacity to perceive situations in their context and to arrive at decisions using this knowledge of contextual circumstances. However, reaching the right contextualized decisions is no straightforward course of action. The capability to do so relies on embodied dispositions for reflecting and acting, and acquiring such dispositions takes learning through habituation and experience (Kristjánsson, 2007). Thus, "knowing" various guidelines for conducting internet-mediated research is one thing, but "acting wisely" in a concrete research setting is often more challenging (Thuesen, 2001, p. 614). Following this line of thought in addressing ethical dilemmas in qualitative internet-mediated research, researchers must employ practical reasoning that implies good judgment. Such judgments could involve narrativizing and so-called "thick ethical descriptions" involving the use of temporal and contextual information in ethical reasoning and "the ability to see events in their value-laden contexts" (Brinkman &

Kvale, 2005, p. 177). In practice, employing such practical reasoning could involve situating the specific challenge in its context to provide necessary information for the researcher to recognize the ethical issues to be addressed. Thus, when attempting to choose the right course of action in deciding whether information from an internet discussion group is to be considered public or private, the researcher should base their decision on a detailed description of the community's characteristics as well as on knowledge of the ethically justifiable and questionable practice.

Implications and Further Research

Internet-mediated qualitative methods provide researchers with an extended toolbox by which they can reach participants faster than before and perhaps also contact people otherwise unwilling to participate and sign up for research purposes. As we have seen, these methods come with specific ethical issues. I have proposed a tentative framework guiding ethical decision-making in qualitative internet-mediated research where a straightforward application of moral principles or procedural guidelines is impossible. The proposed framework is meant as a set of guiding ideas that may help students and researchers resolve the ethical challenges they meet when doing qualitative research based on data collected via the internet. Also, the framework may inspire Institutional Review Boards at universities and research institutions in their efforts to lay out guidelines to secure research integrity. The framework is supposed to help researchers and students enact universal ethical principles in practice and should be qualified and revised based on experiences reported from qualitative internet-mediated studies. As such, the framework should be submitted to empirical investigations addressing practical value and tenability. While presenting a framework for dealing with ethical challenges beyond the rigid application of procedural ethics (Tolich & Tumilty, 2020), this does not imply that such guidelines should be neglected in qualitative internet research. Policies serve as valuable rules of thumb that, to paraphrase Nussbaum (1986, p. 299), constitute a normative force of good concrete decisions of the wise qualitative researcher. As internet-mediated qualitative research does not represent a unique set of procedures, but a particular branch of qualitative research, the framework presented here may also inform discussions and the development of applied ethics among qualitative researchers.

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