Ethic as Method, Method as Ethic

A Case for Reflexivity in Qualitative ICT Research

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> *While philosophical writings are useful for academic conferences and esoteric papers, they too often provide too little substantive direction for researchers and others in the trenches.*
> — Jim Thomas, 2004, p. 189

> *"Fool, Fool! Back to the beginning is the rule!"*
> — Inigo to Fezzik, *The Princess Bride*

Generally, when and if one thinks of "ethics," one imagines codes of conduct, guidelines for attitudes and behaviors, rules for dealing with others or for knowing the difference between right and wrong, good and bad. As moral compasses, ethical guidelines function prior to action. As a part of research design, ethics is often considered prior to the conduct of a study.

Taking a sideways glance at this practice (through critically filtered lenses), this article approaches the issue of ethics in Internet studies from the perspective of a methodologist, specifically focusing on premises and practices of interpretive qualitative inquiry. From this perspective, all social research involves a great deal of encapsulation and control in that the scholar harvests data, sends this information through a set of categorical filters, makes sense of the phenomenon within a particular disciplinary trajectory, and writes research findings as rhetorical appeals to specific audiences. Even as the enterprise of knowledge production is conducted to better understand the social world, it changes the world, creates reality, and writes culture (Clifford and Marcus, 1986). As Van Maanen aptly notes about one common form of qualitative inquiry, "Ethnography irrevocably influences the interests and lives of the peo-

ple represented in them — individually and collectively, for better or for worse" (1998, p. 19).

As public interest in and access to the Internet grew during the early 1990s, ethical issues rose quickly regarding practices and outcomes. People have been rightfully concerned about such practices as the widespread collection, archiving, and selling of one's personal information; the loss of privacy from surveillance technologies; the rise in cut and paste plagiarism in education; questions of authorship and credibility in the publication of information and layperson journalism; and copyright issues raised by the easy sharing of music over the Internet.

Qualitative research concerning the social use and impact of new communication technologies has also raised many ethical questions. The Internet provides ready access to textual data for various types of analysis: Who owns this data? The Internet provides easy access to special interest groups and communities: Are these communities private or public spaces? The Internet provides a global capacity for sending surveys and conducting interviews: How do we gain informed consent? How does one verify the age or vulnerability of participants? Do international boundaries influence the way one collects information? Internet users are in themselves an interesting and readily accessible social group to study: How does one consider issues of authenticity? Should one consider the textual or visual representation of participants, or is it necessary to match their online personae with their drivers' license photos? As Johns, Hall, and Crowell note, "The Internet, simply put, poses issues, problems, and concerns that were not anticipated when regulations were established" (2004, p. 109).

Existing codes of conduct or methodological guidelines for researchers have not translated well into these new social domains. In pondering the opposing viewpoints offered by colleagues about what constitutes ethical practice in citing online participants without their permission and using or not using pseudonyms to identify them, Bruckman (2001) asks: "Could it be that the framework itself is inadequate to handle the issues at hand?" The absence of clear guidelines makes ethical dilemmas even more important for Internet researchers to consider: Gaining informed consent in chatrooms is an elusive, if not impossible act. Preserving the autonomy of online personae is an unusually difficult task if the participant's physical counterpart is deliberately disconnected — who requires protection? Protecting the privacy of persons in online contexts is problematic when these texts are publicly available, particularly if the participant's perception does not match the actuality of privacy. Protection of data in terms of storage and disposal requires an entirely different mode of thinking than was required when we simply stored audio tapes and transcripts in a locked filing cabinet. This, of course, merely begins to scratch the surface.

When research design and conduct is guided directly by regulatory bodies, issues of ethics can be obscured; ethics is more like directives than dilemmas or quandaries. Ethical considerations can be assumed to be built into the pre-determined design requirements and therefore remain almost unnoticed. On the other hand, when ethical research practice is not made an issue, or if one conducts research in a discipline that does not recognize or encounter human subject regulations, codes of conduct can also be transparent, taken for granted as the way things are done. Between these two ends of a continuum, if one grants such an inappropriate binary distinction, lie alternative forms of inquiry and representation, most notably for this discussion, qualitative Internet research.

Ethical discussion emerged inductively as researchers began to reflect on their own or others' research practices, or as online communities began to voice resistance to the intrusions of researchers.[1] This interest in Internet research ethics arose in the midst of an ongoing dialogue in qualitative sociology about the ethics of representation in ethnography and the limitations of Institutional Review Boards in evaluating or effectively guiding qualitative research practice. On several fronts, then, ethics has become an important issue as it relates to studies of ICT and as the governance systems for ethical treatment of human subjects undergo critical questioning from those disciplines not well served by these entities.

In an era of evolving guidelines and principles for ethical practice in ICT research, significant benefit derives from the consideration of ethics as method. Reflexively interrogating one's methods of inquiry shifts attention away from codes of conduct imposed from the outside and reveals hidden ethical practices from the inside. Ethical methods of research require getting to the heart of the matter, in both senses of the phrase. Unraveling the intricate tapestry of method and ethic in research design and process is not as difficult as it may sound: Although it takes practice and constant, critical self analysis, it simply involves partitioning what appears to be a smooth flow of one's choices and movements during the entire research project. Critical junctures and decision points become opportunities to reveal where one is currently standing and what one's intentions are in choosing from a range of possibilities.

Although the perspective taken in this essay is firmly entrenched in an interpretive hermeneutical approach to the study of social life, online or off, the foundations of *ethic as method* can be applied to any research approach. Also, it is worth pointing out that although Internet-mediated contexts may seem unique, it is not necessary to reinvent the wheel in terms of research practice. Good research, online or off, is good research. At the same time, Internet research has highlighted some of the weaknesses of research practice in general, including its ethical regulation.

Online or off, an ethical researcher is one who is prepared, reflexive, flex-

ible, adaptive, and honest. Methods are not simply applied out of habit, but derived through constant, critical reflection on the goals of research and the research questions, sensitively adapted to the specificities of the context.

Qualitative Research

A key feature in qualitative research is that "the object under study is the determining factor for choosing a method and not the other way around" (Flick, 1998, p. 5). Here, it is important to note a sharp distinction between the term "qualitative" as it may be used in hypothetico-deductive studies and as it is used in interpretive, grounded studies. Often, distinctions that properly belong at the epistemological level are placed at the level of method. Quantitative and qualitative methods are not necessarily incompatible. But the central ideas guiding functionalist hypothesis-driven research are different from those in interpretive, grounded research. In the former "a priori codified" type of inquiry (Baszanger & Dodier, 2004), whether one uses quantitative or qualitative methods, one desires exactness, using pre-determined categories and measures to collect and classify data. Ideally, the yield is a statistically significant and generalizable finding. In the latter type of "in situ" inquiry (Baszanger & Dodier, 2004), one begins with the principle of openness and desires richness, using categories that emerge from the context throughout the course of the study and modifying the analytical tools depending on what emerges. Ideally, the yield, whatever its form, teaches us something about the context under study. Based on this distinction at the epistemological level, one might say that qualitative *methods* are different from qualitative *research*.

Although not based on a unified theoretical and methodological concept, qualitative research is often marked by certain features: Research questions change throughout the course of the study; methods are derived in the context of the study and not pre-determined; and researchers engage in strong reflexivity about their role in the production of knowledge.[2] This stance is exemplified in Tedlock's discussion of the interpretive turn in ethnography, a shift away from thinking exclusively of participant observation toward reflexive observation of participation:

> The privileging of participant observation as a scientific method encouraged ethnographers to demonstrate their observational skills in scholarly monographs and their social participation in personal memoirs. This dualistic approach split public (monographs) from private (memoirs) and objective (ethnographic) from subjective (autobiographical) realms of experience. The opposition created what seems, from a 21st-century perspective, not only improbably but also morally suspect. (2005, p. 467)

Qualitative research of ICT

Whether one is studying an online community, interviewing people via email, studying personal identity in homepages or blogs, or analyzing discursive patterns in chatrooms, the basic premise of research design remains somewhat consistent if one is using qualitative approaches: Initial investigation of the phenomenon prompts research questions that in turn inform the methods that will be used not only to create a boundary around the phenomenon and collect information within this context, but also to categorize, analyze, interpret, and (re)present it all to a specific audience. Ideally, the process is iterative; one's attention shifts alternately between close examination of texts to larger sensemaking frameworks.[3]

Studying communication practices, networks, and social formations mediated by or embedded in ICT contexts has challenged existing assumptions and practices of qualitative research. Indeed, the practice of social science research must be examined, rather than taken for granted, in light of new configurations of experience, embodiment, and social production.[4] About qualitative inquiry of information and communication technologies in social contexts, crucial questions emerge:

- If users perceive publicly accessible discourse sites as private, do researchers collecting this information violate basic ethical principles?
- If users have a writing style that is readily identifiable in their online community, or as search engines become more sophisticated, how can a researcher protect anonymity, if such protection is desired by the participant?
- If online discussion sites are highly transient and researchers gaining access permission in June may not be studying the same population in July, how can one gain informed consent?
- If one cannot verify the physical abilities or age of participants in certain online environments, how can one protect those vulnerable populations?

These questions (which represent only the tip of the iceberg in terms of ethical concerns) are vital to consider from the perspective of both research design and ethical guidelines. Examined through the lens of *ethics as governed practice*, one might also ask: Can research review boards require compliance with guidelines that are increasingly more difficult to comply with? Should these guidelines be revised to accommodate new forms of mediated communication and social interaction? Are research review boards adequately guiding researchers struggling with real ethical issues, or are they too strictly focused on compliance with outdated guidelines? Examined through the lens of *ethics*

as method, one might actually back away from these questions, which derive from and therefore privilege those principles governing human subjects research particularly but not exclusively in the U.S. academic research environment. Until and unless the larger issues surrounding regulation of research practice are addressed at international and institutional levels, other questions might be more usefully applied at the individual level, where the researcher is able to let answers emerge, as is appropriate, *in context.* Chris Mann (2003) offers three "simple but systematic ethical probes" that will help us address ethical dilemmas:

1. Are we seeking to magnify the good?
2. Are we acting in ways that do not harm others?
3. Do we recognize the autonomy of others and acknowledge that they are of equal worth to ourselves and should be treated so? (p. 44)

Mann adds an important caveat. "These probes may seem simple and predictable. In fact, as we know, the simplest query in ethics may lead us into very deep water. In addition, simple probes when related to Internet research do *not* produce simple answers" (p. 45).

Ethics and Method

Most often, the questions in the previous section are applied to the dilemmas associated with privacy, anonymity, and informed consent. Equally important are those aspects of one's methods that rarely enter the conversation about ethics in research design because they are considered mere logistics—or not considered at all because they are habits of everyday conduct. In the course of the study, every activity—from habit to logistic to thoughtful research design—is embedded in an ethical framework. Regardless of whether one is conducting a postmodern deconstruction or a literary discourse, case study, ethnographic, or statistical analysis, one's choices matter in that the eventual production of knowledge functions to both build and limit our understanding of the participants, the social world studied, and the processes, structures, and capacities of ICTs.

So although one can begin by addressing conceptual ethical questions, one can also begin from another equally suitable angle, addressing the questions of what makes good quality research? Consider this tentative axiom: *methods first, ethics follows.* This axiom focuses attention on the fact that ethics is embedded in one's everyday method of approaching, understanding, evaluating, and producing academic texts about a social phenomenon. To say methods first, ethics follows is to emphasize that all methods decisions are in actu-

ality ethics decisions and that all ethics decisions are in actuality methods decisions.

This axiom ought not to be the only ethical consideration, but it articulates an often-neglected component of ethics in practice. Most actual research activities fall under the radar of ethics discussions. And most discussions of ethics fall to the margins of research methods texts. Ethics is considered an a priori stance, often regulated more than felt by the researcher. Research design is often considered a procedural or logistic matter, mostly followed, not questioned, particularly if the researcher is within junior ranks of the profession or working within a discipline that values adherence to particular approaches. The consideration of research design as a given is founded in epistemologies that value precision, replicability, validity, and objectivity, all of which require a priori determination of activities. Any interference in the procedures or disruption of pre-determined standards is discouraged because it may invalidate the study. This is antithetical to the idea of context sensitivity and reflexivity, the hallmarks of contemporary interpretive, ethnographically informed qualitative research. So from an interpretive, critical, qualitative framework, top down, a priori establishment and maintenance of procedures yields a lack of flexibility. This can actually weaken social research because it is not adaptable. From an ethical perspective, it may be damaging because it is not context-driven, but rather rule driven.

Method as Habit

Many research decisions are based on habit more than anything else. Habits may be as idiosyncratic as ignoring ads on a website, observing in the field at only certain times of day, writing in third person, or bracketing certain behaviors as unimportant. Habitual decision making, morality, and interpretation are inextricably linked. As Cliff Christians (2005) aptly notes:

> Making a moral decision entails doing the right thing in a particular situation, and to accomplish that successfully, moral knowledge requires that we deliberate within ourselves. Since knowledge of the right can never be knowable in advance, we interpret the concrete situation. Aristotle located this moment of interpretation earlier than logical analysis and insisted that it not be confused with logic. In this manner, Aristotle confirmed an orienting process beyond instinct yet differing from *episteme*." (p. 4)

At its most basic, method is a technique one uses to accomplish a certain goal. Method combined with enforcement becomes procedure; combined with habit it becomes routine. One's technique, procedures, or routines cannot be divorced from those moral codes informing our everyday practices. At risk of

sounding like a self-help guide, then, one might say that "good" research comes from the heart. It both informs and resists logic, serving as an invaluable, active, and almost always discounted, counterpart to reason. Like the senses, it guides us infallibly toward the right path, whether we adopt a stance of "do the right thing," "do no harm," or "do unto others as you would have done to you." Regardless of one's particular stance, even if the heart is suppressed or rejected in the decision-making process, we understand the heart to be a guide to human action. The heart, in this sense, is not the overly romanticized object of St. Valentine, so grossly oversimplified in red balloons, etc. It might be better described as an amalgam of consciousness, mindfulness, honesty, and sensitivity.

Hence, considered from the perspective of method, an ethical researcher is a reflexive researcher who works from the center, the heart. This entails being knowledgeable and prepared; present and aware; adaptive and context sensitive; and honest or mindful. Returning to the axiom of "method first, ethics follows," one notes that all of this is centered in action that is grounded in reflexivity.[5]

The Politics of Ethics

Another way to consider this is to understand that "research" as an activity is never the point of departure. "Problem-solving" or World-Fixing" is. This constitutes a key critical juncture to engage in critical self reflection. To return to the heart of the matter is to ask, What problem am I trying to solve? Slight variation on the theme might yield the question, "Why am I doing research in the first place?"

Everyday decisions are situated in larger institutional infrastructures that privilege certain groups over others. Habits writ large become institutions, which have deep and hidden structures of meaning influencing our activities at an invisible or unconscious level. When students enter a classroom for the first time and automatically sit quietly in their chairs, we see evidence of the persuasive characteristics of institutionalized habits. Scientific knowledge is derived in large part from our choices and decisions in research focus, design, and analysis. Particularly in emerging fields related to ICT, it is vital to attend to these habits operating on our practices.[6]

No context is value-free. Academic disciplines promote particular ways of observing, dissecting, measuring, interpreting, and otherwise making sense of phenomena under investigation. One's decisions may emerge within or resistant to these disciplinary structures. One's decisions also derive from one's research goals, which are seldom acknowledged in research reports but which meaningfully affect the design, process, and outcome of a study. Research con-

ducted under the pressure of tenure is a unique activity that influences everything from the choice of topic to the choice of tool for data gathering, to method of analysis, to style of writing.

Everyday decisions are consequential for individuals and groups being studied as well as for the cultural contexts in which social phenomena are studied, and knowledge production. Add to this the fact that researchers operate in a privileged environment. Feminist, communitarian, participatory, and action research approaches notwithstanding, most research is conducted either from the outside or with an outsider's goal in mind. Most decisions about how to frame the study, the participants, and the research findings belong to the scholar, not the participants. An inherent power imbalance between researcher and researched exists for many reasons, not the least of which is the fact that research almost always benefits the scientific community more than the participants. Although certain cultural groups resist the harvesting of their data by researchers,[7] their actions can be labeled "resistant" precisely because they face a privileged group. If a researcher is reflexive, he or she will see politics at work throughout the entire research enterprise. Identifying the values embedded in even mundane decisions is the first step to creating an ethical *in situ* research stance.

Multiplicity of Method

One's methods are always multiple. Multiple frameworks operate simultaneously, depending on whether one is working at the theoretical or empirical level or somewhere between. As guides for action, methods textbooks must be understood in their own context: If attempting to cover everything for everyone, a textbook might define method as,

quantitative or qualitative.

A more detailed guide on qualitative method would obviously offer a wider range of options within these two broad categories. The breakdown of options varies widely across disciplines and regions. Flick (1998), for example, offers three frameworks:

symbolic interactionism,
ethnomethodology, and
structuralism.

Cresswell (1998) offers five subcategories:

grounded theory,
ethnography,
biography,
case study, and
phenomenology.

These identify general approaches to research but unless understood in detail, do not specify actual activities. As a guidebook becomes more discipline or method specific, one can note even more detailed coverage of stages or facets of research practice. Teaching ethnography, for example, one might include units on,

gaining Access/Site Selection,
fieldwork,
interviewing,
analysis/Interpretation, and
the Research Report.

Continuing on this path of ever increasing specificity, books on fieldwork or interviewing will include much more detailed accounts on what this research activity involves (see for example, Wolcott's [1994] *The Art of Fieldwork* and Spradley's [1979] *The Ethnographic Interview*).

Years of studying, utilizing, and teaching many methodological approaches helped me realize two important things about qualitative inquiry: First, very few textbooks detail the actual process of doing research, including all the activities that disappear in the published report, such as making mistakes, revising research questions, changing the method of analysis, and other emergent activities inherent in qualitative inquiry. Second, what we call simply "method" is actually a multilayered set of inductive and non-linear processes, guided by the context and research questions. The challenge is stopping at critical moments or junctures in the project to reflect on what one is actually doing so as to find a good fit between one's activities and one's theoretical premises, balance learned procedure and new contexts, and alter methods of interpretation to better suit the contingencies of the situation. The multiple layers of everyday activities informing the research project can be unfolded in numerous ways. Consider the following list of possible methods, each of which involves decision-making and consequent behaviors in research:

Method of constructing the question and laying out general design of a study.
Method of defining field boundaries.
Method of accessing participants.

Method of collecting information.
Method of filtering and organizing information.
Method of analyzing data into general themes.
Method of interpreting general themes.
Method of representing self and others in writing.
Method of framing knowledge for particular audiences.

Within these phases of research, a variety of interpretive lenses are applied, each of which is embedded in particular epistemological frameworks. It is important to note that decisions are made, whether or not one chooses to ask questions or stop to reflect at each of these junctures. Our behavior in relation to the phenomenon, whatever we decide it is, will be based in large part on how we have framed it. The process of framing is thus a process of privileging one way of knowing and being over others.

Take for example, the first juncture identified above: *Method of constructing the question and laying out general design of a study.* Specific questions about the phenomenon aid in determining inductively the appropriate approach. Generally, after asking a question such as "How do users perceive ICT in developing countries?" the researcher will then ask a methodological question, "How can that question be answered?" or "What tools will get closest to helping to answer the question?" The subsequent execution of generally accepted techniques is not always the most appropriate fit. Careful and deliberate analysis of the question and explication of the terms within it can give the researcher more sensitivity to the nuances of the question. This is an essential form of reflexivity.

At this juncture, one can also ask questions at the meta level: "Why do it at all?" "What is the purpose of this research project?" "What is the potential or desired outcome and why is research necessary for this outcome?" In asking these questions, one might begin to identify some of the multiple and largely invisible masks one wears in the performance of everyday life (see Goffman, 1967; 1974), allowing one to get at issues that may seem tangential to the study at hand but ultimately connect to the heart of the matter: "What's the point?" Answers might range from "Achieve world peace" to "get tenure." Both of these responses can help one identify one's ethical stance from the inside out.

Or take the second item on the list: *Method of defining field boundaries.* In studying technologically mediated contexts or using Internet-based technologies to interact with study participants, one must make more deliberate choices about boundaries than one might in traditional ethnographic contexts, which are often pre-determined geographically or and/or physically. Christine Hine's (2000; 2005; forthcoming) work explores the discursive and very obviously constructed nature of field boundaries in virtual ethnographies. As I note in previous studies, "Boundary markers are underwritten by the

researcher's choices about how to find data sites, which search engines to use to sample, whom to interact with, what to say in interaction with participants, what language to use, when to seek and conduct interviews (including both time of day and considering time zones), and so forth" (Markham, 2005, p. 801; also see Markham 1998). This is not unique to Internet research, of course. Smith and Eisenberg's study (1988) of Disneyland's organizational culture included extensive interviews from employees but neglected the entire night shift, which undoubtedly influenced findings about Disney as a family. Though there are no *a priori* right or wrong answers in determining field boundaries, since all fieldwork is bounded by the actions of the researcher, there are better or worse ways to go about making decisions about boundaries. One of the least ethical positions is to be unconsciousness of the extent to which the researcher's choices and actions determine the boundaries. Again, we return to the concept of reflexivity.

How do we select the object of analysis? On whom do we rely to provide information about the phenomenon? How do we gain access to communities online? These questions run alongside questions about boundaries because they, too, shape the character of the study. Internet researchers have found that many of these questions arise as a result of complications in the field.[8]

A slight shift of reflexive position might yield the question: "To what extent is one's decision about access driven by convenience rather than the research question, participants, or context?" Certainly, ICTs make access easy in certain contexts: Whereas one would undoubtedly have difficulty finding, much less accessing, a physical community of people who promote hate crimes, anorexia as a lifestyle choice, child pornography, or other transgressive behaviors, these communities can be easily located online. Subterfuge or deception is relatively easy when the researcher is anonymous or for all intents and purposes invisible (lurking or data mining). While access is made possible, even easy, a vital question may be, "Should this context be accessed?" This question prompts various answers, depending on the goal of investigation and one's ethical stance. In the U.S., one might tend toward a utilitarian stance, in which case the potential benefits to society would be weighed against individual rights, whereas in Scandinavia, one might take a deontological or communitarian stance, whereby the individual's rights are paramount.[9]

Most ethics discussions in Internet research have focused on how we protect privacy, maintain confidentiality, gain informed consent, and related issues arising from the Belmont Report's call for beneficence, justice, and respect for persons (1979). In Internet-mediated contexts, these issues are complicated and the debate about what constitutes ethical procedure is certainly not resolved. These discussions are extensive and researchers are advised to seek the excellent advice from practitioners and ethicists who have learned from their own and others' mistakes.

It is important, however, to continue the discussion beyond those aspects proscribed by governing boards. "What counts as data?" is less salient but not less important when we consider what is potentially silenced or obscured when filtered out as irrelevant. I discuss this in depth elsewhere (Markham 2004, 2005). William Foote White's classic ethnography of street corner society, for example, emerged from his participation with a particular group of people who spoke Italian. Since he did not speak Italian, White was required to let his key informant determine what counted as data and what could be ignored or not translated. Did this matter? Probably.

The selected decision points noted above illustrate only one of many possible ways to dissect the research design in order to reflexively interrogate one's own practices and assumptions throughout the course of the study. In an actual study, the critical junctures and questions would not be pre-determined but emergent in the iterative process of inquiry and the *in situ* application of appropriate methods.

Up to this point, the discussion has been fairly idealized, in the sense that we are talking about situations whereby the researcher has the option to make decisions freely, without individual dispositions, disciplinary conditions, or regulatory constraints. This freedom to construct one's methodology in a reflexive, mindful, context-sensitive manner is not possible in every discipline. Moreover, it can actually be hampered by the very entities that seek to promote ethical treatment of human subjects. The irony of institutional review boards in the United States is that their desire to create standards for ethical behavior is actualized by the creation and enforcement of standard procedures that end up dictating ethical behaviors. The equivocation of this double signification beguiles researchers and regulators alike to equate ethics with procedures. This might explain why ethics discussions among ICT researchers tend to center around those concerns that are regulated, rather than on those that surface from the interior of the actual study.

Fallacies of linguistic confusion aside, research governing boards are, like any bureaucratized organization, plagued by a desire for stability and balance, a tendency to adhere to traditions. This promotes homeostasis at the expense of evolution. Lincoln provides a compelling critique of the current structure and practices of the IRB, detailing how its guidelines map poorly onto research enterprises outside the medical and behavioral sciences. U.S. research review boards have not only been recalcitrant in adjusting to alternative forms of inquiry; their practices also severely restrict methods that lie outside the positivist framework for scientific inquiry. ICT research is undergoing many of the same problems (Lincoln, 2005; see also Thomas, 2003; and Christians, 2005).

Getting back to the direct topic of methods, the structure and practices of review agencies—notably IRBs in the United States—encourage researchers to be less concerned with ethical dilemmas as they arise during the research

process and more concerned with getting approval for research design and procedures before the research begins (Thomas, 2004). And this approval for qualitative research is often difficult to obtain because IRB guidelines were not originally designed for social research and even less for Internet contexts or methods. Further, alterations to research design after the project has begun often require resubmission and review, thereby discouraging researchers from making modifications once the project has begun (Lincoln, 2005).

Conclusion

In closing, let me offer three recommendations about approaching ethics and method related to advocacy for the reflexive and mindful production of knowledge about information and communication technologies: First, I advocate constant and critical reflexivity about one's own everyday activities throughout the research process in order to gain a better appreciation of one's hidden ethics. Most basically, a method is nothing more nor less than a means of getting something done. And every choice one makes about how to get something done is grounded in a set of moral principles. Some ethical principles and guidelines emerge from one's disciplinary training, but unpacking the detailed features of one's taken-for-granted everyday activities reveals multiple layers of principles-in-action. Looking from the inside out will provide significant opportunities for engaging in reflexive ethical praxis.

Second, I advocate, along with scholars such as Thomas (2004), Lincoln (2005), and Christians (2005), the importance of actively resisting and pushing for restructuring rules and guidelines set forth by various ethics governing bodies such as the IRB in the United States, on the grounds that current governance may be quite counterproductive in sponsoring engaged, reflexive, and context specific ethical practice among social science researchers.

Reflexive ethics is a stance that views ethics as a dialogic process rather than a set of values or principles. This stance advocates intensive and critical dissection of the everyday means by which the researcher makes sense of his or her world, whether directly or tangentially related to the research project. This mode of inquiry requires shifting the criteria for quality away from traditional measures of validity and reliability toward responsibility and accountability, whereby,

- The research questions drive procedures and design.
- The context guides responses to sensitive situations.
- Broad training in a range of inquiry methods aids in adaptation and flexibility.

This is an ideal and marginalized stance for research practice, one that frequently requires researchers to defend their choices against rigorous criticism from various governing entities, from peer review to disciplinary traditions to institutional research review boards. The advocated stance is not an easy path. As I write this, I shrug: It's the right thing to do. Changing the system is never easy, but if we are to preserve human subject rights in growing cultures of technological and information saturation, we must engage in the significant persuasion that will yield a paradigm shift in the academe of the western scientific tradition.

Third, I advocate broad training and understanding of positivist and post-positivist approaches to qualitative inquiry. The best research comes from those who are willing and able to flexibly adapt to the situation, using methods that are appropriate to the task. Maslow's phrase is apt: "If you only have a hammer, every problem seems like a nail." Indeed, the strongest qualitative ICT research pays close heed to the guidance of decades of inquiry in a broad range of disciplines (Janowski, 2005). Methods adopted must be suitable to the task, which requires one to have a hefty toolbox. This may, for researchers in disciplines unaccustomed to such flexible adaptation, be challenging, but in the long run, this may help an entire discipline begin to question its own research habits and may work to shift outmoded principles and practices within larger institutional entities that regulate social inquiry.

Notes

1. In-depth discussions can be found in edited volumes such as Buchanan (2004) or Johns, Chen, and Hall (2004); reports produced for the American Association for the Advancement of Science (Frankel & Siang, 1999) and the Association of Internet Researchers (Ess and the AoIR working committee on ethics, 2002); and conferences such as Common Ground: Methodological and Ethical Challenges in Internet Research (Trondheim, Norway, 2002) or Computing Ethics, Philosophical Enquiries (Lancaster, UK, 2001).

2. For further reading on qualitative research theory and practice, see Denzin & Lincoln (2005, as well as two previous editions); and Silverman (2004). For some classic discussions of the interpretive turn in social science research, see Clifford & Marcus (1986); Geertz (1973); Wolff (1992); and Van Maanen (1988). For extensive guidance in qualitative research design and procedures, see Flick (1998); and Wolcott (1994; 1995).

3. For descriptions of this circular process as grounded theory, see Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Corbin & Strauss, 1990.

4. This can be considered similar to the trajectories and reconfigurations of inquiry practiced and advocated by feminist and postcolonial scholars (see Fine, 2005, for example).

5. There are multiple other ways to conceptualize the connection between morality and methods. The third edition of Denzin & Lincoln's *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2005) gives ethicality a central role in over 40 different chapters describing

different research stances and methods. Olesen's chapter in this volume is an excellent overview of how feminists have engaged the dualisms of morality and method.

6. For extended or interesting discussions on the emerging structures and features of ICT-related disciplines, see the special issues of *the Information Society*, 2004; *New Media & Society*, 2004; and research reports coming out of the Royal Academy of the Netherland's *Virtual Knowledge Studio*.

7. For an excellent discussion of how various online communities perceive researchers, see Chen, Hall, & Johns, 2004.

8. To review a wide range of cases and ethical perspectives, see Barnes, 2004; Bassett & O'Riordan, 2002; Bromseth, 2003; Bruckman, 2004; Clegg Smith, 2004; Gajalla, 2002; Sveningsson, 2001, 2004; White, 2001.

9. The distinction between these approaches is well laid out by Charles Ess and the AoIR working committee on Ethics (2002). A slightly different articulation of approaches is offered by Clifford Christians in the most recent (2005) edition of the *Handbook of Qualitative Research*.

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