

“IT’S ONLY ROCK N ROLL’, OR IS IT? ETHICS AND FAN DISCUSSION BOARDS”
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Introducing the Research

As a researcher in a project that started in early 2006, I wonder how much I can use of the discussion boards of the fan communities I’m studying. A secondary matter is to ask if I can include observations of mine from out in the field. My IRB has approved my research as submitted, and yet I remain curious about what others would do in this case.

As a participant in all the discussion groups from 2005 onward, I started to look into studying them. After seeking approval from the leader of the main online community of focus, the study of the online fans of The Rolling Stones finished its first phase when I posted an exploratory online questionnaire, posting two or three questions week by week. Numbers of participants decreased over time. The questions asked about favorite band members, reactions of friends and family to their fandom, and how they selected their usernames and avatars, among other topics. On it I said I wouldn’t use names, but would feel free to quote from anything people said there.

The second phase began with seeking approval from three other group leaders, and beginning the semi-structured interviews with members of Stones fan boards, now numbering 93. These interviews ranged from 40 minutes to over five hours, conducted primarily by telephone. They covered some of the material from the questionnaires and more, including histories of each fan’s attendance at Stones concerts and of the individual’s participation in Stones fan groups online. The third phase is about comparing communities online, mainly the two largest groups “Shattered” and “YGMR” (You Got Me Rocking) in detail. The research also refers to the overall features of two other Stones fan communities, a smaller public group, and a private mailing list. These groups have overlapping memberships although most fans would claim a home group.

Both sides of the Argument

The two alternatives at the extremes of a continuum are at one end a decision not to quote at all from the two main discussion boards, and at the other, to quote freely, with usernames attached. Arguments are phrased for and against the latter policy, to use the online material without qualifiers. For this document, I draw freely from readings on the topics, discussions with other internet researchers, and in particular, the recently published book by Heidi McKee and James Porter, *The Ethics of internet Research* (Peter Lang, 2009).

Arguments Against Using Online Posts and Usernames

- The researcher has other ways of getting the data, e.g. through interviews.
- The topic area is sensitive, in that people may not want to broadcast the intensity of their fandom or how far they go to fulfill it. The population is somewhat vulnerable.

- The boards, while public, remain more privately conceived by some, looked on as conversations by participants. People may have changed their views posted years before, available in online archives. Because the researcher is a participant/observer, the boards are not just texts, but domains of interaction.
- Through googling, posts can easily be matched to user IDs, which sometimes contain clues to real life identities.
- People sometimes use real names in posts responding to others.
- Some users have either objected to quotation or not approved the use of quoted posts. Only those members who have given approval for individual postings may be quoted.
- It is easy enough to obtain the permission of an individual poster for verbatim use of his/her own words.

Arguments For Using Online Posts and Usernames

- Studying online communities requires using data directly from them. Paraphrased, unidentified summaries of posts are not enough.
- The topic area is not sensitive, involving a preference for a type of music and band, not a more personal, often stigmatized matter such as sexual preference or addiction. The population is not vulnerable.
- The boards are public, entered and read by anyone who wishes, without even having to register with a username. Members are aware that years of their back posts are available to anyone searching for them. The researcher-as member has been alerted to areas of concerns of members, in participating for a year before considering the research to the present.
- Even if googled, posts are linked to usernames, not real identities.
- Real names can be deleted or changed when quoting posts.
- On a public board, it is up to the researcher what to use, regardless of the reactions of the members, only a small proportion of whom have registered any negativity. Informed consent is unrealistic and unrequired.
- On one board, with no instant messaging, many have not posted their email addresses, and on the other, many don't check their messages regularly.

The seven arguments on both sides represent three major issues counter-posing the needs of the researcher with those of the people studied: (1) sensitivity of topics and participants regarding content and identification of individuals, (2) the degree of public access to the discussion board and its members, and (3) type of data needed to draw conclusions. A middle ground between the two extremes of "for" and "against" is an option too, that would consist of choices from both sides of the

arguments presented. How much and to what effect I as the researcher would use my own posts, profile information and observations is another factor that could influence decisions on what to use from others. The more I use my own written material, the less I might need to draw on others, and yet this data could skew the representation of the overall sites.

Conclusion

By presenting these arguments to a group concerned with issues of ethics in internet research, I hope to clarify the choices I have before continuing to research the discussion boards and to present and publish the results. Thus far I have only quoted from the online questionnaire, and from interviews where presentations of user identity were determined beforehand. With the thought that every case is somewhat different and also that we are developing understandings that will add to official codes of the future, I put forth my ideas for discussion.