

## Chapter XVIII

# User-Centered Internet Research: The Ethical Challenge

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### ABSTRACT

*The current model of research ethics assumes an investigator holds expert status and superior knowledge and a subject has a passive role. This model is meeting increasing resistance from subjects on the Internet. A collaborative model that recognizes the contribution of both researcher and subject is necessary for both practical and ethical reasons. We argue in this chapter that the history of the ethics and politics of research offers insight into our present situation and its dilemmas.*

### TWO MODELS OF ETHICS

The ethics of online research has received a great deal of attention from scholars in a variety of disciplines of late. The Internet is increasingly popular as a research site and it poses unique technological and methodological challenges. This has led to a

renewal of the traditional themes of research ethics, such as the right of human subjects to give or withhold informed consent, protection of privacy and similar issues (see Ess, in press; Frankel & Siang, 1999; Thomas, 1996). Yet the ethical issues facing Internet researchers also involve some rather different problems that have not been addressed. We argue in this chapter that the history of the ethics and politics of research offers insight into our present situation and its dilemmas.

Research ethics originated from the concerns that surrounded the study of human subjects after the ghastly Nazi experiments in World War II. Following the war, public funding for research involving human subjects reached unprecedented levels, raising the issue of accountability to prominence ("Preface," 1969, p. v). Despite this early attention, it was not until the late 1960s that experimentation on human subjects drew widespread scholarly interest.

There are a number of similarities between the ethical issues that were discussed at that time and those faced by online researchers today. Both discussions identify the same actors as integral to ethical research procedures: the researcher, the participant, society at large, regulatory bodies (i.e., ethics committees, government, etc.) and publishing personnel all prove to be important to the process. Regulating the relationships among these diverse actors emerges as the ultimate mission of research ethics. However, opinions on how to fulfill this mission differ significantly depending on the analysis of the relationships among actors. Interestingly, sensitivity to the importance of this initial analysis seems to have been higher in the early debates. Contemporary accounts tend to assume a standard and unquestioned set of relations. To better understand this difference, it is helpful to review Freund's (1969) two models of research ethics.

In his introduction to a formative discussion of the ethics of experimentation with human subjects, published as a special issue of *Daedalus* (Freund, 1969), Freund distinguishes the "fiduciary" (p. ix), or law-model, from the "sociological model" (p. viii) as two distinct types of research ethics. In the law-model "a trustee, because of his superior competence and the trust and reliance placed in him, owes a duty of undivided loyalty and devotion to his client, the more so when [he] ... enjoys as a class certain exclusive privileges to carry on his calling" (Freund, 1969, p. ix). Medicine offers an excellent example of the trustee-client relationship. The doctor, because of his extensive schooling and mastery of the medical discipline, is more knowledgeable and competent than the patient. Thus the patient must trust the doctor to do the best he can. Invested with this immense trust, the doctor is responsible for fully protecting and serving his patient to his utmost capabilities. The asymmetrical power distribution in this relationship is compensated by the doctor's commitment to use this power for the betterment of the client (Freund, 1969, p. ix).

In contrast, the sociological model "underscores the communal aspect of the endeavor, the reciprocity of rights and duties, the positive values to be pursued, encouraged and facilitated, as well as the hazards, limitations and safeguards" (Freund, 1969, p. viii). Unlike the law model, which is based on a trustee-client relationship, the sociological model is patterned around the professional collegium, where everyone is granted equal status and works towards a common goal. In this model the doctor and the patient and, similarly, the researcher and the research subject, are construed as equally significant if not equally knowledgeable participants in a common project. Power and responsibility in this relationship, then, are fundamentally distributed.

It is noteworthy that current debates on Internet research ethics assume the law model. It is generally taken for granted that the researcher as trustee is ultimately responsible for the protection of the client. (Thomas, 1996; King, 1996). The researcher, because of her expert status, level of knowledge, competence, power and privileges, owes a special responsibility towards the participant. This responsibility is fulfilled by ensuring informed consent and protection of privacy (Waskul & Douglass, 1996). Furthermore, ethics review boards at most universities are primarily concerned with ensuring that the researcher in fact lives up to her trustee status. Thus they demand explanations as to the level of potential risk of harm to the participant, assurances and proof of informed consent and voluntary participation, as well as detailed descriptions of the recruitment processes and protection of anonymity.

While this process has been somewhat effective in protecting research subjects from questionable projects, it also places the subject in a passive position. The demand that the researcher should “inform” the participant about the goals and methods of the study guarantees that the participant is without agency in formulating research questions and project design. The obligation to allow the participant to withdraw from the study at any time locks him/her into a binary mode of participation—either in or out—with no power to negotiate and change the course of the research. The law model ensures that the unequal power structure between trustee and client remains intact – the trustee holds the superior knowledge and competence, while the client must blindly trust that his best interests are served. There is no distributed power relation with equal obligations and expectations. In essence, there is no room for an active participant. Instead, the participant is investigated by the researcher, who is presumed to have all the competences present in the research situation. This is, we contend, an unfortunate and unnecessary predicament for both researcher and participant, especially with regard to most Internet research. An alternative, collaborative model, proposed by Parsons (1969) and Mead (1969) in the aforementioned special issue of *Daedalus*, would be much more productive in this area. In what follows we will elaborate the early formulation of the collaborative model of research ethics and suggest directions for its further development and application to Internet research.

## THE PROFESSIONAL COMPLEX

Parsons (1969) defines his concept of the “professional complex” as “a complex of occupational groups that perform certain rather specialized functions for others (‘laymen’) in the society on the basis of high-level and specialized competence, with the attendant fiduciary responsibility” (p. 331). The complex is broken down into three categories: research (the creation of new knowledge), practice (the utilization of knowledge in the service of practical human interests) and teaching (the transmission of knowledge to those classes of persons with an interest in its acquisition). Examples of such occupational groups include the clergy, who look after the spiritual welfare of the people via teaching; lawyers, who ensure justice by practicing law, and academics who attempt to uncover new knowledge through research.

Parsons (1969) sees the professional complex as embodying a collegial ethics where the different skills and knowledge of the members all contribute to the group’s attempt to achieve a common goal, and power is widely distributed. The most interesting aspect

of Parson's construct is that it is not constituted only of professionals but also lay persons (i.e., students, clients and research participants) as well. All of these diverse actors become involved in a common solidary collective, so that the research participant, and not just the researcher, belongs to the collegial group as a member of the professional complex, because of his or her knowledge, experience or personal attributes useful to the research enterprise. In this formulation, research becomes a team effort where mutual respect and support is offered to fellow members. Common values and goals are fundamental to the professional complex. By becoming a member of the group, each party implicitly acknowledges them.

According to Mead (1969) the collaborative model presented by Parsons as an ideal has long been an anthropological field practice (p. 361). The very nature of anthropological work, Mead (1969) claims, requires that the researcher build a stable relationship with the people among whom he or she seeks knowledge, and especially that s/he enlist the systematic collaboration of informants.

Thus, the "sociological" or collaborative, model attempts to incorporate the participant into the research process itself, recognizing the participant's place as an active member working towards the common goal. Insofar as this model implies not just the acceptance of certain duties and cooperation by research subjects, but also their input into the research process, it requires a willing, not simply informed, participant (see Jonas, 1969; Feenberg, 1995). The participant must identify with the overall goal of the study and, therefore, desire to be a part of the research process.

## PARTICIPANTS' INTERESTS

Feenberg's (1995, 1999) work suggests a way to redefine the two models of ethics from the perspective of participants' rights, on one hand, and interests, on the other. The law model is centered on the notion of formal rights. Codes of medical ethics, Feenberg (1995) observes, are designed to guarantee the patient's right to refuse to lend his or her body for use by others, the right to information about risks, the right to withdraw at any time, the right to treatment for complications arising out of experimental participation, etc. (p. 102). This negative emphasis on rights has its roots in the revulsion against the abuse of patients and prisoners in Nazi wartime experimentation. Mead (1969), for her part, speaks about the powerful American cultural attitudes connecting the idea of experimentation to the word "guinea pig" (p. 367). The relationship between experimenter and his/her human subjects is thus perceived as a dangerous relationship in which human beings can be reduced to the status of experimental animals, stripped of their human rights and dignity. Against this background, true willingness to participate in experimentation is heroic and consent is suspect wherever it can be attributed to lower resistance, false hopes or captive circumstance (Jonas, 1969, p. 239).

And yet, as Feenberg (1995) has shown in his analysis of the case of AIDS patients, the emphasis on negative rights in current codes of research ethics has been challenged by human subjects who recognize important interests of their own in experimental participation. AIDS patients' movements have shown that the concept of participant interests can be the cornerstone of a new type of research ethics capable of realizing the positive inclusion of the participant as collaborator in the research enterprise envisioned by Parsons and Mead in the late 1960s.

In this light, the question of “what does the research subject get out of it,” or, in other words, the question regarding the benefits of research for participants intrudes with new force. And this raises the further question: How are participants’ needs and potential benefits to be known and incorporated into the research design? The law model assumes scientific expertise to be a reliable ground for design. In its terms, expert researchers already know the participants’ and society’s best interest. What this model demands beyond that is researchers’ competence and benevolence in protecting individual participants’ rights—freedom from harm, confidentiality, privacy, etc.

In the early versions of the collaborative model proposed by Parsons (1969) and Mead (1969), the question of participants’ interests receives only cursory treatment. In Parsons’ (1969) account the answer to the question “what does the research subject get out of it?” automatically follows from the recognition of the research subject as a part of the professional system. Given his or her status in the system, the research participant gets the same kinds of rewards as all other participants. However, the reward system is defined primarily by the interests of the investigators (Parsons, 1969, p. 339). Parsons (1969) identifies a range of motives for participation in research “bracketed” between the “highest” motive—the sense of contribution to knowledge—and the “lowest” motive of financial remuneration (p. 340). Intermediate motives include (in the case of medical research) the interest in the conquest of a preventable and curable disease and the sense of meaningfulness that an otherwise isolated and incapacitated sick person may gain out of his or her active contribution to a project (Parsons, 1969, p. 340).

Mead (1969) sees intrinsic value in the mere courtesy of treating subjects as collaborators which, she expects, will protect their human dignity. Such courtesy involves explaining to participants the purposes of the experiment and, generally, treating them as “intelligent, responsible, although not necessarily scientifically knowledgeable human beings” (Mead, 1969, p. 372). Compelling as this argument sounds, one notices the conflation between researchers’ interest in “new knowledge” and participants’ (informants’) interests that are subsumed under those of the anthropologist. Research goals and techniques emerge out of the realm of expert knowledge and, in the best case scenario, collaboration-minded researchers manage to translate them into the language of potential participants, who, for their part, embrace these goals as their own. What kind of new knowledge does the anthropologist search for? Whom does this knowledge benefit and how? These questions do not arise in Mead’s (1969) discussion of research ethics.

Feenberg’s (1995) account of participants’ interests offers insight into the question of “what does the research subject get out of it?” Feenberg points out that the needs research can potentially serve are not automatically credited as interests, but become so only through an authorized interpretation of some sort. Achieving recognition of these interests is in part a political process (Feenberg, 1995, p. 106). In his “sociotechnical” interpretation of medical ethics, Feenberg (1995) offers examples of how aspects of research (e.g., research goals and techniques) that appear “purely scientific” can be understood as a “technical mediation of a social interest” (p. 106). Feenberg (1995), therefore, claims that research is penetrated through and through by normative considerations without being “unscientific.” This is explained by the availability of alternative research designs with equivalent scientific validity but different consequences for the participants.

Thus, a new dimension of research ethics emerges. Instead of simply offering a set of rules for the protection of individual rights arising at the interface between the professional and the lay participants in the research enterprise, ethics appears to be a “switching post between social demands and technical interventions” (p. 106). As such, ethics lies at the heart of the research enterprise and gives it legitimacy and direction. The extent to which participants’ interests are recognized and addressed by the goals and techniques of research is a central ethical issue. A model of research ethics based on this interpretation would be collaborative in a more radical sense than the one developed by Parsons and Mead. Knowledge of participants’ interests and the potential benefits they might derive from participation is not a question resolved by unaided scientific expertise. Such knowledge is held primarily by the research participants themselves.

It is, then, precisely this very dimension of collaboration in research that is the most interesting and potentially productive. When participants are perceived as passive, the opportunity to learn from their experience goes sadly unused. When they are invited to identify as collaborators with research objectives set by scientific experts, their intrinsic interests are often overlooked. On the contrary, by incorporating the research participant in the very process of formulation of research goals and designs, the issues that truly concern participants can be addressed.

## THE STATE OF INTERNET KNOWLEDGE

How do these reflections inspired by earlier debates over medical ethics relate to Internet research today? There are some important similarities and dissimilarities between these two distinct research endeavors that have to be addressed before any parallels can be drawn. Medicine is a long-established field in which therapeutic practice and research have evolved hand-in-hand. The general utility of medical research—relieving human suffering and saving lives—is widely recognized, even if the specific objectives of concrete projects can occasionally be questioned. From this perspective, some potential participant interests in medical research are immediately recognizable. Parsons (1969) sums these up as “the interest in the conquest of preventable and curable disease and of premature death” (p. 340). Other interests, as Feenberg has shown, become known as a result of political process and struggle.

Internet research, on the other hand, has no such direct relation to practice. It has arisen as an afterthought in the course of the development of computer-network technology. Internet practice, understood as the design, engineering and construction of technical systems and their applications, has rarely relied on Internet research, i.e., social research involving human subjects. This disconnect between practice and research creates a significant difficulty in answering the question “what does the research subject get out of it.” We argue that the difficulty can be overcome through a social constructivist approach to Internet development that acknowledges users’ contribution to the shaping of the technology as a new communication medium. From such a position, numerous social groups are involved and have a stake, or interest, in how the Internet is built, employed and regulated. Identifying and articulating the diverse interests of all these groups, especially those that are typically deprived of voice and

visibility, thus becomes a central task of research inseparable from Internet practice. We will examine this dynamic in more detail in the following section.

There is another specific feature of the field of Internet research that distinguishes it from medicine: the notorious “competence gap” (see Parsons, 1969, p. 336) between professional and lay members of the “complex,” so glaring in medicine, is much less noticeable here. The “human subjects” of Internet research may themselves be designers, engineers, content-providers and seasoned users, who participate in creating the medium and often possess more knowledge of it than the researchers who study them. It is not atypical for researchers to “discover” Internet phenomena such as chat, online discussions, downloading of music, etc., long after those selected as subjects have learned and practiced the ins and outs of the new application. These subjects are then approached by the researcher and asked to share their practical knowledge so that it can be interpreted in the conceptual frameworks of an academic discipline. All too often the results are skewed by the ignorance of the researcher who is a newcomer to a well developed field of practice with a body of lore far more sophisticated, than anything an outsider can discover on the basis of a cursory study.

Nevertheless, whatever its flaws, Internet research is important and does serve to advance a scholarly discipline. What is less clear is the benefit for the participating subjects. It is unusual for the knowledge gained through research to return anything at all to the subjects who made it possible. It is this state of affairs, we believe, and not so much concern for individual privacy, that causes participants’ outcry against “harvesting” (see Sharf, 1999) data from Internet forums.

In earlier publications we have argued that subjects react against alienation of their own online products, when these are appropriated by researchers (see Bakardjieva & Feenberg, 2000, 2001). This attitude seems to be spreading. A researcher looking for health-related discussions on the Internet recently noticed that most of the online forums dealing with the illness she wanted to study had “No research!” policies published on their websites (Solomon, 2003). We find this kind of aversion to Internet research highly disturbing and suspect that the current narrow notion of research ethics, with its indifference to fostering subjects’ interests and goals, has something to do with it.

The lack of a pronounced competence gap between researchers and subjects as well as the vagueness of subjects’ potential benefits configure the professional-lay relationship in the area of Internet research in a way quite distinct from that of medicine. This situation creates both opportunities and challenges for Internet research ethics. The preoccupation with individual rights and protection of subjects must be complemented with an adequate conception of participants’ interests in the research process and its results. What is more, subjects’ relatively high competence makes them potentially valuable collaborators in the research effort. To ensure their cooperation will require some major changes in research practice. It is necessary not only to inform subjects about the study, but to work with them at the stage of study design. In this lies the real opportunity for joining practice and research. Inquiry must be directed towards questions of actual concern to subjects, and this can only happen where the lay, but knowledgeable, subject is invited into the negotiations around research design presently open exclusively to “specialists.”

## USER-CENTERED INTERNET RESEARCH

As we have noted, medical researchers are aware that their efforts may someday save lives. But no such connection between theory and practice is evident in Internet research. The question, “why do the study in the first place?,” is seldom raised. Researchers, in most cases, have remained surprisingly unreflexive with regard to their own practice. A strong case could be made that a big part of the research enterprise has been driven by the relative newness of the technology, by deterministic expectations of significant impacts on society or, let us face it, simply the ease and accessibility of the data. While, admittedly, there is less room to conceive of tangible, physical benefits for Internet users than for medical patients, the fact remains that Internet researchers have not conceptualized their own accountability to the populations they study.

This problem is not entirely unprecedented in the field of communication, where much of the research is done. It may therefore be useful to recall an earlier debate in that field over the distinction between “administrative” and “critical” research (Melody & Mansell, 1983; Smythe & Van Dinh, 1983). In the 1980s, communication scholars discovered that they raised different research problems, employed different methods and had different background ideologies as well (Smythe & Van Dinh, 1983, p. 117). Generally speaking, the administrative approach chooses its research problems with an interest in making an organization’s actions more efficient. This approach usually aims at results that support, or at least do not seriously disturb, the status quo. Examples of administrative research include market research, behavioral research or survey research (Smythe & Van Dinh, 1983).

Critical research, on the other hand, addresses questions of power, inequality and exploitation in economic and political institutions and looks for ways to reshape institutions to meet the needs of the community. Critical research often advocates radical changes in the established social order.

It has been argued that the administrative research program, for example, in audience studies, serves those in power by delivering the audience as an object of control (see Ang, 1991). On the other hand, the critical approach unveils mechanisms of exploitation and alienation in media institutions and practices. It aims at consciousness raising and education of the exploited and encourages resistance. Yet, according to Melody and Mansell (1983, p. 110), scholars taking the critical approach, while excellent at exposing the problems, have generally failed to offer concrete solutions.

The utility of sharp dichotomies like this may be questionable, but nevertheless there is something instructive about the very effort to define the ideological, political and practical relevance of research, exemplified by the debate over these different approaches. Following this example, Internet researchers would be well advised to start explicating their motives, intentions and underlying ideologies: What are the interests and agendas behind any particular study? To whom do researchers report? Whose side are they on? These questions, we submit, define the relationship between the researcher and the participant from which all other, more narrowly perceived, ethical issues stem.

We find a useful model of reflexive and collaborative research in Smith’s (1987) conception of sociology from the standpoint of and for women. According to Smith (1987), traditional sociology is locked into a professional, administrative and managerial apparatus to which women are outsiders. As women are excluded from traditional sociology, so Internet users are excluded from the knowledge-building process in the

study of the Internet. They are most typically seen as objects to count and report on, with a view to increasing profit and system efficiency, or simple career advancement. Thus, a fundamental shift is necessary. A new model of Internet research for users must be devised. This is research that starts from the standpoint of subjects and their actual engagements with the technology in everyday life and aims to explicate for them the larger social matrix, in which they are implicated by virtue of their Internet usage. Subjects are naturally treated as collaborators in such a research paradigm, as they hold unique knowledge of their local situations and the life contexts into which the Internet is incorporated. The researcher, for his/her part, contributes the mastery of systematic techniques and conceptual vocabularies through which individual experiences are given significance transcending the local context. Thus the voices of the research participants can penetrate the specialized discourses that shape the Internet as a technology and social institution. Importantly, the problematics examined by this research do not stem from the specialized discourses of the academic disciplines, but is generated in the experience of subjects. Thus, Smith (1987) writes: "The purpose and direction of inquiry is in part (and particularly at the outset of this approach to sociology) an explication or codification ... of a problematic that is implicit in the everyday world" (p. 90).

The method of participatory action research (PAR) represents another useful source of ideas for the user-centered approach to Internet research we are advocating here. PAR prioritizes the democratization of social inquiry, by actively engaging subjects in the design and conduct of research (see Krimerman, 2001). It aims at achieving "cognitive justice" or inclusion in the knowledge-building process, exemplified by research involving groups that are typically marginalized and excluded from such practices. The second, equally important, goal of PAR is to help excluded groups to become conscious of their situation within the power structure and to emancipate them as reflexive actors capable of initiating change. Although PAR has been proven effective and has created a respectable tradition in fields, such as health care, social work and education, it has not yet been applied to Internet studies. Some promising first steps have been made in adapting PAR to ethnographic inquiry into information technologies, including the Internet. Slater, Tacchi and Lewis (2002), for instance, studied the Kothmale Community Radio Internet Project (KCRIP) in Sri Lanka, simultaneously developing what they called an "ethnographic action approach" involving local informants, in a variety of roles and in all stages of the project. The ethnographers saw their own task in the field not only as collecting data, but also as training local people into a "research culture" that would give them the analytical competency necessary for formulating and pursuing research questions.

PAR has usually been understood and implemented as research that benefits "the excluded, impoverished, marginalized, oppressed" (Krimerman, 2001, p. 63), for example, the mentally ill, battered wives, exploited children, homeless people, etc. It is not the approach that immediately comes to mind when studying Internet users, who are believed to be representatives of a privileged population with higher-than-average income and education. However, in all fields of human practice, specifically those related to science and technology, there exists characteristic monopolies of knowledge and expertise and, consequently, relatively marginalized populations. Internet users are one such relatively voiceless social category, to which PAR can open new opportunities for emancipation.

In the course of several research projects on the nature of online community, we became convinced that Internet research offers novel avenues for involving subjects as

collaborators in this more radical way. The goal of our research was to discover how users appropriate the virtual space of the computer network as an environment for community life, and how technical features of groupware systems facilitate or obstruct this process. In order to achieve that, we needed to observe closely the interactions in diverse online groups and to ask community participants about their interpretations of what was going on in these forums. In the process of negotiating access to several virtual communities, we found that their members responded actively, and often critically, to our declared objectives. Taking advantage of the permanently open two-way communication channel, some participants engaged in a dialogue with us not only asking for clarifications, but also suggesting alternative directions for our inquiry. We believe this active interest in collaboration opens up new possibilities for elaborating a situated ethical approach, elegantly combining research objectives and methods with subjects' interests.

Participants in our projects were often not completely comfortable with the idea of lending themselves for observation. For example, one online group member responded to our invitation to take part in a project thus: "Interesting idea, much like watching the interactions in the monkey cages at the zoo (But excuse my sarcasm.)" But the same man went on to say:

*I also think that the more important question you should ask is "How is discourse affected when traditional cultural contexts are deconstructed or not available? Does discourse proceed 'sans social context,' or is a new social context built to fill the void?" ... My own personal experience in online communities is that morality [our main focus of interest] is hardly an issue, but cultural norms and the lack of ability to convey interpersonal conversational clues, such as facial expression or tone of voice, create big obstacles.*

Other participants also responded critically to the goals and procedures of our research and at some points demonstrated clear interest in influencing its course. Here for example is a new research objective suggested by one member of a health-related mailing list:

*One thing I wondered about as a possible end-product of research like yours was making a case for funding for Internet access for many disabled people, shut-ins, etc. Pie-in-the-sky vision, of course, but if it could be shown that people used less medical care and fewer ER visits and saved gobs of money by having the support and info from the Net, who knows what might happen?*

"Are you planning to include some of the negative effects of online communities in your study?" asked another woman, a member of a Web-based discussion group. She told us how she had become "overinvolved" with an online community for an extended period and had found herself spending huge amounts of time with it every day. Furthermore, her relationship with one of the community members reached the point where it could have endangered her marriage:

*Now, I should clarify that I am a very independent, sensible individual, with no addictive tendencies, and a very strong marriage (believe it or not!) which is why I think*

*it's important for you to look at these other aspects of online communities. It can affect \*anyone\* this way.*

The everyday world of this woman, her family life, her responsibilities to her children who had been receiving less attention from her due to her obsession with the online group and her struggle to stay true to the kind of person she believed she was, all these things were connected to her experience as an Internet user and were charting a problematic divergent from our original intentions. Her experience suggested a need to add consideration of conflicts between online and face-to-face community.

In yet another case, a potential research participant, after looking carefully at our proposal to study the ethical aspects of online community life, wrote back to us to highlight those questions that had resonated with her own experiences with online group life:

*I often wonder if, in fact, people are truthful or sincere. I say that as someone who periodically notes the inconsistency in what people write over time. The forums are, in a large respect, still virtually anonymous places ... a hide-a-way, if you will, for those seeking such a thing. Don't get me wrong, I've met some wonderful women on the forum but still remain somewhat skeptical of what I read.*

Communications like these were extremely enlightening for us. Subjects were not content with being informed about the goals of the study. They initiated a negotiation in which our stated goals were critically examined, modified and reformulated in terms meaningful to those (still potential) research participants. The more or less conscious objective of this process was to align our (researchers') goals with participants' interests. Thus we were faced with the challenge to take our relationship with subjects to the level where the questions we investigate are influenced not just by scientific programs or other (commercial, political, etc.) agendas but also by participants' interests. Because this is a matter of accountability, respect, sincerity and honesty in relation to subjects, we believe it to be a matter of research ethics. It is, undoubtedly, also a political matter. The identification and recognition of participants' interests, as Feenberg (1995) has argued, is a political process in which research is deeply implicated. User-centered research has the potential to bring previously ignored or excluded interests into the process of social shaping of the Internet. It allows researchers to act as translators between abstract technical and social-scientific discourses and the lived experiences of the people who deal with the Internet on an everyday basis. This represents a higher-order motive for involvement in the research enterprise.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The three authors have contributed equally to the writing of this chapter in the spirit of the collaborative model to be discussed below. Their names are listed alphabetically.