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Review: Readings in Virtual Research Ethics. Issues and Controversies.

Abstract:

This paper shall give a review of Elizabeth A. Buchanan (Ed.): Readings in Virtual Research Ethics. Issues and Controversies. Information Science Pub. , 2003. 350 pages Broschur. 69,00 €

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The virtual realm, which is essentially based on ICT, has changed the framework of research activities and practices and is now challenging ethical reflections upon it. Thus a common observation is, that not only the quality of research practices has been improved by using ICT, but also the quantity of these activities has increased during the last decade in a significant way. Especially the internet and its technical facilities has given a new dimension to the opportunities of research. Even if the attention to ethical challenges of research is not new at all, there are new questions of ethics as it is mentioned again and again by several contributors to the "Readings in Virtual Research Ethics. Issues and Controversies", a volume recently edited by Elizabeth A. Buchanan, who is co-director of the Center for Information Policy Research at the School of Information Studies, University of Wisconsin/Milwaukee.

As Buchanan herself stresses, the 1990s have given way to diverse disciplines which looked around the ethical questions connected with or evoqued by research activities on the media basis of ICT. In a certain way the conference around virtual research ethics, which was convened in 1999 by The American Academy for the Advancement of Science in collaboration with the NIH Office for Protection from Research Risks and from which Buchanan is quoting a paragraph in her introduction, can be seen as a starting point for an interdisciplinary and systematic reflection on ethics within the field of virtual research. What in 1999 has been begun through this conference is now continued by Buchanan's collection of readings. The large diversity of virtual research is represented by the contributors in Buchanan's volume: the 18 chapters, written by 28 authors, cover a wide variety of disciplines and perspectives as for example psychology, medicine, philosophy, anthropology, education, communications, business, and women's studies among others.

Elizabeth A. Buchanan organized the 18 chapters of her volume in five sections according to different material or methodological approaches to the subject. The first section inquires into the "Foundations of Virtual Research Ethics" and comprises both theoretical approaches particurlarly with regard to the philosophical perspective of ethical pluralism and some very first more practical orientations in asking for a compliance of online surveys and analysis with already existing ethical standards and guidelines. The second section illustrates different practical approaches to virtual research and its instruments. Thus the look for synchronous CMC-forms (computer-mediated communication) or e-mailing as a method of data collection evokes ethical questions especially with regard to identity, privacy, informed consent, or chat copyright.

The third section is an investigation of "research ethics in practice"; it consists on the one hand of various disciplinary case studies of virtual research in action and on the other hand on the concurrent ethical issues each author encounters in his or her engagement in the virtual. The reader finds here for instance studies on Internet relationships and sexuality and studies of interviewing feminist activists through the National Organization of Women (NOW) Village.

Section four asks above all if online research with minors ought to receive a special consideration due to their potential vulnerability and inability to comprehend research itself. Guiding questions are: What are specific difficulties in studying children? How could parental consent be obtained when children or adolescents are studied? And what kind of cross-cultural differences can be observed in the study of minors.

In section five we encounter "A Call for Researchers", which stresses that there exists a new relationship between researchers and researched within the virtual realm – relationship which is leading to new considerations and which is depending on new understandings by acknowledging the cross-cultural and international characteristics of virtual research.

As this short and selective survey on the five sections in Buchanan's volume shows, virtual research is not only marked by its multidisciplinarity but also by a wide range of applications. Despite this variety of applications, different themes and issues, the ethical request can be focussed on the researcher and the researched individuals.

Some contributors of the "Readings" express their doubt that the ethical guidelines for traditional face-to-face research could be applied directly to online research, because new ethical issues are inherent to the (new) medium. Therefore exploring ethical guidelines for the conduct of online research is one of the main aims of the volume. If we now read Buchanan's comprehensive collection of virtual research practices not only from a general perspective of social sciences with a wide range of interests but with a specific focus on questions and suggestions of ethics and especially of information ethics, we might gain at least four categories in a kind of systematic synthesis or relecture: (1) the identification of ethical challenges, (2) the references of ethical guidelines; (3) general moral principles; (4) a

list of concrete ethical aims for the practice of online research.

Among the ethical challenges we can identify as a very first concern and a high moral attention that is addressed to the rights and protection of the individual: Ensuring human rights, dignity and welfare of participants in online studies and virtual research is an aim frequently named. Any regulation of virtual research activities and online studies should be regarded as for the sake of the participants: the ethical treatment of participants must be ensured. Other goals of virtual research ethics are to minimize any risks which are associated with various virtual research endeavours. A more formal aim is the task to translate existing ethical guidelines to online research or to identify and resolve common ethical problems – despite of the diversity of research fields and applications.

A very important role can be seen in the activities of institutions, boards, panels, or conferences, as they are referred to in many chapters of Buchanan's "Readings". A leading role in establishing ethical guidelides is obviously held by the American Psychological Association (APA). In the chapters for example the Belmont Report is mentioned as a set of guiding principles of research ethics or the function of Institution Review Boards (IRB) with regard to ethical evaluation. The fact that particularly IRBs are very often quoted proves the importance of that institution in raising awareness, attention and sensibility to ethical challenges in research in general. And last but not least, due to Buchanans "Readings" or similiar studies institutions like IRBs, which have to judge whether projects and endeavours fulfill ethical requirement or not, in future will face more proposals for virtual research ethics than in the past. That might include that IRBs will, must even devote more attention to the large variety of issues raised in Buchanan's collection. If we take into account the various institutions, organizations, codes which are committed to preserve ethical guidelines and provide researchers and other ICT-professionals with moral orientation, it seems to be evident, that online research requires above all a commitment to already established principles rather than the invention of new ethical rules.

As already mentioned, a common moral "credo" is the commitment to human rights and the necessary protection of the subject: And especially with regard to this central claim for individual protection we can collect a lot of criteria in Buchanan's volume to get a long list of essential ethical requirements. Other values or principles which are proclaimed are jus-

tice, beneficence, autonomy, dignity, or welfare. Concrete ethical aims are related to privacy and integrity of the people who are studied, the informed consent, which particularly is a constant component in the various listings. Suggestions with regard to the informed consent are for example that consent procedures ought to use a language which is comprehensible to the participants; the challenge which must be faced is that the pool of participants is potentially demographically, geographically and linguistically quite diverse; participants in research should have the right to decide whether, for how long and on what conditions they will take part in the study; and a check list may comprise questions like these: Do sites permit asking questions at any point of the study? Is it possible to ask questions before giving any consent to the study? Do the sites state that a person must be 18 years old to be participant? Very close to informed consent is the question of permission: it is not always clear on how to obtain and maintain permission   therefore a permission based approach is proposed. Other ethical sensitive points are the protection of anonymity, copy-right aspects, the ownership of words, data safety, or the request for confidentiality and trust: it is important that participants get highest possible confidelntiaity, and that personal information should be stored in a way so as to keep unauthorized persons from taking part oft its content. Trust is related to the interaction between researcher and researched; therefore it is necessary that researchers have to familiarize themselves with the cultural contexts into which they are entering when conducting research online.

The chapters collected by Elizabeth A. Buchanan show that it is not only the question what is legal in virtual research, but also what is legitimate with regard to the essential interests and the fundamental dignity of human beings in their role as participants of studies, surveys and interviews. Moral standards intend to guide researchers that their research on human subjects will follow both legal requirements and ethical practices. Even after reading Buchanan's "Readings" we encounter questions like the following: How can web studies and experiments really comply with ethical standards? How could it be achieved that researchers indeed observe already established ethical standards? Is ethical behaviour only a question of professional ethos or personal virtues? Could or must there be not only organized ethical codes of conduct, but institutional constraints which guarantee the observation of ethical principles and standards? One result of the "Readings" seems to be obvious: a high responsibility bears on the shoulders of the re-

searcher him- or herself; thus she or he could indeed find a very essential and helpful guideline in already existing codes or principles and a very good orientation in the precious and worthy work Buchanan has done by her collection.

Another problem is that the application of online research ethics to online environments has only recently begun to be discussed: for the moment there seems to be no consensus what recommandations should be given, there are divergent opinions of what ethical rules should be followed. It can not be avoided that there remains a grey area in virtual research practices. And even if there are existing ethical guidelines for virtual research and despite of good intentions and the researchers best efforts, there is no doubt that harm could be done to participants in internet research. The role of participants should be stengthened: Therefore the empowerment of participants could be a strategy beneath the necessary ethical behaviour of the researcher: with regard to this a perspective of future virtual research could be a "collaborative model" that intends to incorporate the participant in to the research process itself – recognizing the participant's place as an active member working towards the common goal; thus the participants interest could be better recognized. Finally it cannot be prevented that procedures which are established to protect human participants may indeed deter them from participating in online surveys and experiments.

Giving some illustrations of Buchanan's "Readings" I would like to name in a rather selective manner some noteworthy facts, examples, ideas or problems: 80 percent to 90 percent of internet research seems to be located in the USA and Canada; the proposal of an online participants "bill of rights" is the most essential one – it would promote norms concerning what online research participants can expect and demand from researchers who seek their participation; a very interesting discussion is realated to the question how participants of studies, surveys, interviews, who should remain anonymous, could be paid; the issue of payment to induce participation in Internet research is obviously an important but controversial point; with regard to the unceitainties face to study results a reflexive cybersociology is proposed to acknowledge both the validity and potential falseness of virtual data; how could parental consent be obtained if research studies are addressed to minors: children or adolescents? And finally: a warning is expressed not to overgraze the commons in cyberspace: Virtual reseach would be unusuable, if (potential) partici-

pants of virtual research will encounter a flood of studies. Their willingness to participate could decrease rapidly while or because the demand for participation is increasing.

Without any doubt: Buchanan's collection deserves our attention and our respectful acknowledgement. It shows that the request for a virtual research ethics is related to a wide panorama of applications in research practices. The chapters provide an excellent survey of varoius research applications, the reader gets familiar with different actors and their perspectives. Furthermore the "Readings" are not only a welcome proof for the high ethical awareness and moral attention with regard to virtual research activities, they also show the "classical" tension between freedom of research and the individual rights of the subjects especially in their role as particapants of online studies. Over and above it is an instructive introduction to the specific terminology of virtual research, its media and its methodologies. According to the already mentioned ethical challenge with regard to the position and role of participants the "Readings" show ways how to resituate the research subjects in order to incorporate participants needs and benefits into the research design.

Any reader of Buchanan's collection of virtual research ethics will certainly be taken to many places, even if he or she will find similiar problems, concerns or questions. Thus the "Readings" are a wide choice of impulses to think about research and research ethics in a new context. And even if themes are very often similiar, each chapter deals with them in its own manner uniquely and fruitfully. Because of the wide range of issues and themes the index is very useful to the reader especially when he or she is just looking for a specific problem.

A more critical point is that the reader could get lost in the richness of information and diversity of issues and so loose orientation. Useful are references to institutions or organizations, which deal with virtual research ethics; the references to the secondary literature provide not only a very large survey to current research and academic discussion. Despite of the deserved acknowledgement and appreciation of Buchanan's volume, some questions remain open, some aspects are not satisfied: Would "Online or Internet Research Ethics" not be a better or more precise term than the very unprecise "Virtual"? And what does "Virtual Research" exactly mean? Even if there is an evident consciousness by several chapters for cross-cultural considerations, the volume as one ensemble remains restricted on a very exclusive

Western view on information societies. Desirable would be a condensed version which would organize its contents in a more systematic way, not at last to give a better and more precise orientation one the different issues and to avoid repetitions and redundancies. Even if – as Buchanan says – "many stones left unturned for future researchers in the virtual realm", some fertile ground has been already explored. Without any doubt: The diversity of contributions in Buchanans volume as a shell plenty of various fruits of intellectual reflection and analysis makes it useful for many readers, not only for online researches. Therefore these "Readings" should not only be read by those who are already participating

in the discourse and networking of information ethics, but also by those who are professionals within the manifold variety of ICT-based virtual research. Only by this a hermetic discourse among "moralists" can be prevented, and only by this wide range of perception an effective ethical impact on every day research-practices could be developed. The current challenge at that turning point from a postspective reflection to a prospective ethical guiding and orientation now lies in the bridging from reading to doing.