

3 Studying Young People's Blogs: Ethical Implications

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Abstract

As internet research was gradually established as a discipline, whose focus and/or locus is the internet (Rall, 2007), ethical issues came to the fore. These issues, often centering around the shifting concept of privacy and ownership of text, consider new practices and communications online, and increasingly, the conduct of ethical research within various sites on the internet. This chapter draws on a five year study of young people's blogs in Ireland which used an ethnographic approach to two different groups of bloggers, varying in age from 17 to 23. Ethical issues were identified from the start of the project, and indeed included at design stage; some of the issues arose from the multidisciplinary nature of internet research, and these will be examined in this chapter in the first place; current recommendations available to the internet researcher will be addressed, as well as the ethical practices of researchers in the field of blogging. Several approaches and ethical solutions will be reported from within the qualitative research tradition. This chapter will then examine issues which have been identified as "conceptual gaps" by Zimmer (2010), illustrated in light of this ethnographic study of young Irish bloggers, in particular the concept of privacy.

Keywords: ethical practices, ethical issues, privacy, ownership of text, blog.

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1. The ethics of internet research

The interdisciplinary aspect of most internet research brings its own ethical issues, due to the difference in the approach to ethics from various disciplines, such as social sciences, which take their model from medical science, or literary studies, which considers people as authors and treats them as such (Ess & the AoIR ethics working committee, 2002). For researchers from the field of humanities, these conflicting frameworks should be acknowledged in the case of a cross-disciplinary research project.

Social sciences ethical norms are derived from the ethical norms of the medical field. The basic ethical principles are seen as autonomy, beneficence, and justice (Greig & Taylor, 1999). One of the main issues is that of informed consent of participants in a study, and of the duty of the researcher to do no harm. Whereas these basic ethical principles of research cannot be denied, the advent of a new cultural context has led to the belief that “[o]nline research is marked as a special category in which the institutionalized understandings of the ethics of research must be re-examined” (Hine, 2005, p. 5).

Within a tradition of literary studies, Serfaty (2004) contends that a literary approach to blogs frees the researcher of certain ethical considerations, as the text is studied rather than the author, and is in fact a “self-contained, self referential artefact” (p. 10). She also decided to avoid any contact with the diarists she studied in order to avoid any possible relationship, which she sees as detrimental to the quality of the research, as she feels that informing the participants “ultimately amounts to granting them the right to oversee the research project” (Serfaty, 2004, p. 12).

The literary approach to studying online texts considers the participant in internet communication as an author and the text as a published literary artefact (Ess, 2002). A social sciences approach to the same study will consider the author as a participant in the research project, and as such will grant her some protection in ethical guidelines. Bruckman (2002) argues that the ‘semi-publishing’ of material online by ‘amateur artists’ offers new challenges and

requires new approaches to ethical dilemmas, dealing with liminal spaces between public and private.

Both approaches are also subject to emerging netiquette, and sometimes heralded by the use of Creative Commons¹ convention in blogs. Indeed bloggers in general follow emerging rules of netiquette, which do not allow for copying or republishing without crediting the original author, by name and through hyperlinks to the text quoted. Similarly, when a blog post is picked up by print media and the content is used offline, it is seen as plagiarism if the blog is not quoted as the original source. This has led some bloggers to insert a Creative Commons license in their blogs, which allows sharing and non-commercial use with attribution.

In any case, ethical approaches are complicated by several other issues if the participants/authors are children or young people, who warrant increased protection: the authors of the blogs in this study could be regarded as a vulnerable group in social sciences disciplines, where research involving children and young people is governed by its own set of rules (Greig & Taylor, 1999). Mixing these two aspects brings out a third set of ethical issues, particular to the study of young people online, which merits special consideration.

Recent developments in youth research have changed assumptions about transitions between youth and adulthood, and notably led to the gradual replacement of the terms ‘adolescence’ and ‘adolescents’ by the terms ‘youth’ and ‘young people’, as well as the introduction of the new term of ‘young adult’ (Bois-Reymond & Chisholm, 2006). This trend is notably echoed in literature, which now discerns between children’s literature and the newer genre of young adult fiction. It is now accepted that youth encompasses a wide range of ages and stages of development, and that it extends into ages which had previously been considered as adult; this longer youth period tends to mix within the same category people of very different ages and psychological and psychosocial development: a ten year old child does not have the same

1. <http://creativecommons.org/>

understanding as a twenty year old woman. However, some young people, albeit not children, remain legally minor, and ethical issues regarding them occupy a grey area.

Informed consent is one of the main issues in research with children and young people, who are traditionally represented as vulnerable groups in social sciences. Obtaining consent from young people is a relatively new notion, as children for a long time were considered mere objects of research, reflecting their historical place in society (Greig & Taylor, 1999). However, within the past decades, it has been recognised that children should have a say in research that involves them.

“Researching youth also brings research ethics – a professional challenge – to the forefront in considering how young people can and should be informed and included as active research subjects in studies about youth” (Chisholm, 2006, p. 18).

The Declaration of Helsinki (1964) states that not only is consent to be sought from a legal guardian, but also from children themselves. Informed consent from adolescents seems to be a grey area. In England, the Family Law Reform Act of 1969¹ states that, in the medical field, children from 16 to 17 years old are presumed to be competent to consent to treatment, and a similar situation exists in Ireland. When it comes to consent online, the office of the Irish data commissioner’s website² advises that

“[t]he minimum age at which consent can be legitimately obtained is not defined in the Data Protection Act, 1988. Section 2A(1) of the Acts states that consent cannot be obtained from a person who, by reason of age, is likely to be unable to appreciate the nature and effect of such consent. Judging maturity will vary from case to case” (para. 1-2).

1. <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1969/46>

2. <http://www.dataprotection.ie/viewdoc.asp?m=m&fn=/documents/guidance/3gm5.htm>

It goes on to refer to the General Practice Information Technology¹ (GPIT) guide in the medical area, which defines the age of consent at 16. The Office of the Data Commissioner adds that for marketing purposes, 14 can be considered as a reasonable consent age, and that companies should ensure that the individual understands the implications of giving consent.

1.1. Directives and guidelines

Elgesem (2002) refers to the the guidelines published by the body for research ethics in Norway, regarding ethical research in social sciences and the humanities, which identifies two broad categories of conflict of interest: those dealing with the integrity of the research process, and those dealing with the integrity of research subjects. Elgesem (2002) posits that online research ethics can be drawn from offline research ethics, with some proviso, which refer to the problematic private/public dichotomy. The presence of a fragmented audience online is a major difference and is linked to the expectation of a “limited and homogeneous audience” (Elgesem, 2002, p. 202) by online participants, even when the fora are not password-protected and could thus be seen as widely public. The issue of privacy, which has been deemed irrelevant for published texts (Serfaty, 2004) thus becomes an issue of perceived privacy.

1.2. AoIR recommendations

The Association of Internet Researchers published in 2002 a set of guidelines from their ethics working group, guidelines which became a major source of information for internet researchers (Ess & the AoIR ethics working committee, 2002). Whilst they acknowledged the existence and validity of various ethical frameworks, they also highlighted some major questions relevant to internet research, amongst which the various venues which can be found and researched and the different ethical expectations which their users may have. Similarly, they advised to ascertain whether the participants in the project should be considered more as authors or as research subjects, as this perception also

1. http://www.icgp.ie/go/in_the_practice/information_technology

carries different ethical expectations. Whether offline or online, children should be afforded increased ethical protection, and this was also reflected in the AoIR guidelines. These were the guidelines which were followed at the time of research. However, online researchers are constantly confronted to new spaces, new norms, and new ethical problems. The Association of Internet Researchers has thus published a new set of guidelines, stressing the importance of context, whilst also identifying some areas which are specific to internet research.

1.3. Research ethics committees

Markham and Baym (2009) conducted research in the perception of internet research ethical issues amongst Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) in the United States. Most were found to have no guidelines whatsoever on internet research (62%); in the qualitative study carried out along with the questionnaire, the need for education of IRBs was a recurring theme; issues of data security and consent were most problematic for IRBs, and most frequently mentioned were consent and privacy issues which are difficult to comprehend in a new space. Some initiatives have been led by educators and researchers in an effort to adapt guidelines and recommendations to the study of online communities: a program led by Bruckman (2002) had thus enabled undergraduates to learn how to conduct ethical research in online communities, with an emphasis on the protection of human subjects.

European universities seem to encounter the same problems in adapting to new contexts of research, and some have issued specific guidelines: University of Bristol, UK Kids Online in the London School of Economics for example have guidelines for internet research and internet research with children and young people. In many cases however, the public/private divide seems to be the main guideline which can be applied to online research: texts which are publicly available are thus exempt from ethical review, except in the cases of vulnerable populations. Indeed the study of blogs brings these issues to the fore, as blog posts are often considered public texts, by the audience as well as bloggers who seek public recognition.

2. Research on blogging: researchers in practice

For [Herring, Scheidt, Wright, and Bonus \(2005\)](#), blogging is seen as many things by many people. For journalists, it is about news from an alternative source, for scholars it is about research and knowledge sharing, but for many private individuals, it is about expression and self-empowerment. Their study endeavours to find the properties of blogs at a moment in time, and categorise them as a new genre, situated with respect to offline genres and the broader genre ecology of the internet.

It is now argued that the time has gone for the relevance of the word blog ([Bruns & Jacobs, 2006](#); [Efimova, 2009b](#)). Indeed a lot of the misunderstandings within the blogging world and misinformation in the print media come from an overuse of the word, with no strict definition: newspapers now commonly introduce a blog section to their online editions, and indeed some introduce blog sections to their paper edition. Some predict that the word will soon only be used with a qualifier, as in research blogging, community blogging, or diary blogging ([Bruns & Jacobs, 2006](#)), and it is increasingly necessary to define the type of blog which is the object of research ([Efimova, 2009b](#); [Nowson, 2006](#)). Indeed when it comes to ethical issues in research on blogs, this definition becomes essential, if only to ascertain the different levels of expectations of privacy from the blogger's point of view.

Moreover, different approaches are taken by researchers from different disciplines and traditions. In some cases, the blogger is seen solely as an author. [Serfaty \(2004\)](#) studies personal blogs, where bloggers are seen as authors, and thus exempt from consent according to humanities and literary studies traditions. She also acknowledges their identity as potential participants, yet denies their participation as threatening the integrity of the research. The ethical approach she takes is to treat bloggers as literary authors, and thus she does not ask for consent, and does not attempt to conceal their online identities. [Hendrick \(2012\)](#) also sees the blogger as an author or intellectual, indeed she is a blogger herself, and sometimes part of a blogging community which she studies. [Hendrick \(2012\)](#) does not ask for consent, nor does she anonymise her

data, as she follows criteria led out by [Pace and Livingston \(2005\)](#) exempting from consent material which is publicly archived, is not password protected, is not sensitive, and no state or site policy prohibits its use.

[Efimova \(2009a\)](#), in her PhD research, considers bloggers as public intellectuals; she points out the fundamental difference between the knowledge or professional blogger and the academic, in which the blogger cites other blogs and links back to them, thus creating a web of knowledge, whereas the academic anonymises sources. [Efimova \(2009a\)](#) treats the bloggers from her study as public intellectuals, and thus asks no permission, but disseminates the results of her research through her blog, while linking to the bloggers cited, thus choosing an ethical approach that follows ethnographic sensibilities.

Different ethical choices are taken by researchers who study young people's blogs ([Brake, 2009](#); [Fowley, 2011](#)). [Brake \(2009\)](#) feels an ethical and moral obligation towards the young people whose blogs he studies. Not only does he ask for consent from the bloggers, but he acts as an educator, pointing out the potential problems in allowing a researcher to publish part of their blog posts. Indeed, despite their consent, he does not reproduce text from the blogs, because "several of those who make their weblogs available freely online (and would be prepared to have them publicised in an academic study) may come to regret that choice later in life" ([Brake, 2009](#), p. 76).

3. Conceptual gaps in research ethics

As outlined by the AoIR recommendations, and illustrated by the examples above, researchers are guided not only by rules, recommendations and best practices, but also by their own moral compass, and their knowledge of the context in which their research is based ([Ess & the AoIR ethics working committee, 2002](#)).

[Zimmer \(2010\)](#) identifies several issues which epitomise the differences between offline and online research. I used his idea of conceptual gap and correlate it with my own ethical choices. Indeed as an internet researcher attempting to fill

in the required forms for my university's Research Ethics Committee, I came across those conceptual gaps, relating to the issues of consent, anonymity, harm and privacy. The following section will thus match those concepts to issues encountered in my research, after defining the type of ethnography which was chosen.

The research identified and followed two groups of young bloggers in Ireland: the first group, which will be referred to in this chapter, was formed around a few young people who had attended a summer school together; their blogs became a means of keeping in touch with their friends, as well as recounting their daily lives. At the heart of the second group were two young bloggers who managed their friendship at a distance, as well as interacting with others. All the blogs were on the *LiveJournal* platform, which was most popular for young people at the time.

The methodological choice of ethnographic tools and methods was a result of the theoretical lens used to approach the study; however, it was also heavily influenced by the ethical approach that underpinned the study.

“Consider this tentative axiom: methods first, ethics follow. This axiom focuses attention on the fact that ethics are embedded in one's everyday method of approaching, understanding, evaluating, and producing academic texts about a social phenomenon. To say methods first; ethics follow is to emphasize that all methods decisions are in actuality ethics decisions and that all ethics decisions are in actuality methods decisions” (Markham, 2006, p. 7).

As the internet becomes more enmeshed in daily life, and the demarcations between online and offline relationships become increasingly blurred, many have called for ethnographies which follow the participants offline and online throughout their daily lives (boyd, 2008). I did not however follow this trend in this research project, where, on the contrary, I ensured that the ethnography remained online only, and this for several reasons. I was guided first of all by ethical considerations, due mainly to the nature of the study and of the age of

the young bloggers (Fowley, 2011). When the study started, in 2005, few young people had started blogging in Ireland, and the search for the initial bloggers had to start online. Whereas it may have been easy to move an ethnography project from an offline context to an online context, it seemed ethically dubious to initiate contact with young people online and then attempt to meet them offline.

3.1. Consent

There are two problematic aspects to the issue of consent in internet research. The first is linked to the issue of authenticity, and the other one to access to the offline identity of the participant. The oft-quoted *New Yorker* cartoon states that on the internet, no one knows if you're a dog. Indeed, if bloggers for example have chosen to blog under a pseudonym, it can be difficult, time-consuming, and sometimes impossible to ascertain the 'real' identity of the author; naturally, no one knows how old you are either, at least in theory. However, young people in particular tend to be mostly truthful in the representation of their age (Scheidt, 2006). Indeed most young people now live a seamless life between online and offline, where their network of friends follow them from one space to the other (boyd, 2008; Ito et al., 2008; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). Even if the age of the blogger can be ascertained, the identity remains that which they have chosen, and if they have chosen to link their blog to an email address bearing a similar pseudonym, only their online identity can be verified, and only their online identity can give consent to take part in the research.

This problem is naturally more acute in the case of online only ethnographies, and was amplified by my reluctance to request personal information. I felt that such an attempt would be contrary to best practice and indeed to current recommendations to parents and children or teenagers, who are advised never to reveal any personal information to a stranger on the internet. This was also the reason for the methodological choice of an online only ethnography: I had found these young peoples' blogs online, and thus all communication remained online. This choice of course also implied that I would not have access to their parents for consent, which in turn influenced the data sampling,

as I chose not to interact with anyone under sixteen without parental consent. The permanence of the digital text meant that I did however have access to some parts of the blogs when the writer was under sixteen, in the case when the blog had been started before that age, with the consent of the now-sixteen or eighteen year old blogger.

3.2. Anonymity

It should first of all be noted that the participants were anonymous from the outset, as they did not blog under their own name, nor did they usually reveal their full name or address. However, a pseudo, or in this particular case a *LiveJournal* name, is often used on different fora and is as such part of the online person (Bruckman, 2002); the use of this pseudo can thus be seen as a failure to anonymise the research by the participants. I decided to use double pseudonyms, and asked the bloggers if they wished to choose a new pseudo themselves, so that they could retain some power over their texts and their presence in the research. Some decided to create their own names, others did not answer the message sent to them, and were randomly allocated a new pseudonym.

However, it could be argued that anonymity is not always possible, even if the bloggers use pseudonyms, as their life stories contain elements relating to events, places and people which may help to identify them. If Lally (2009) is aware of the ‘tyranny of distance’ linked to internet research, in my case, I was very much aware of the tyranny of proximity; Ireland is a small country, with a small population, where the famous ‘degrees of separations’ are fewer than in more populated areas. Whyte (2006) points out that, when it comes to research on specific populations, it is practically impossible to guarantee anonymity in Ireland. This local issue amplified another anonymity problem online, due this time to the power of search engines. If texts are quoted in a publication, these excerpts can be entered in search engines and the blog from which they were selected can thus be found. A significant number of the quotes were taken from blogs which are no longer publicly accessible. When excerpts from the blogs were chosen, the bloggers were advised of which part of their text was being cited and were also advised to lock the relevant entry if it was still public. Even

though in more conventional settings, this might be construed as perverting data, in an emergent social space where younger people can lack adult guidance, it should be a moral imperative for the researcher to educate and protect the young participants in a study.

3.3. Harm

This concept, and its adaptation to online spaces, can be linked to the concept of privacy, anonymity, and space. Some sensitive information, some texts of a very personal nature, when taken out of context, can be met by a public for which they were not intended. This breach of the expectation of privacy could indeed lead to harm for the participants, in the case for example of young people who may be openly gay online, but not offline.

Another ethical issue, this time of concern to the researcher, is the possibility of encountering disturbing texts. These could possibly be relating an obvious danger for a blogger, such as depression, risk of suicide, incidence of abuse or even relating the possibility of danger to the public, suggested by rantings and threats of violent action. Bearing in mind that information posted on internet sites is not always truthful, and that in some cases the text belongs more to fiction than autobiography, some practical steps are however possible: contact with the platform security officer is the first step to take, as the companies have requested personal details when the blog/social network page was set up. If the matter is more urgent, contact should be attempted through the platform with the named friends of the adolescent who are likely to know her in real life, or to have access to personal information such as telephone number or address, and they should be requested to contact the person, their family, or a relevant official body. These issues are being discussed regularly amongst internet researchers, and some propositions have been made in the US for an anonymous online support forum for young people.

3.4. Privacy

The AoIR recommendations highlight the concept of *expectation* of privacy in

various online spaces (Ess & the AoIR ethics working committee, 2002). The binary private/public concept is no longer of use when it comes to the internet, and this issue is at the heart of many moral panics and many misunderstandings. Different venues carry different expectations, some fora are open, others require registration and password and as such are *felt* as more private. The motivation of the writer can also influence this perception and expectation of privacy: whereas some bloggers consider blogging as a form of publishing, expecting to be cited as authors, others regard their blogs as personal artefacts which they expect a small selection of readers to share. In knowledge blogs, the aim is dissemination of knowledge. For diary-style blogs, the content is different, as is the intent, and instead of publication of ‘one to many’, the aim is for ‘one to some’.

4. Publicly available data

Several Research Ethics Committees in Ireland consider that publicly available data is exempt from ethics approval, and texts freely available online tend to be categorised as such. Indeed this attitude is also prevalent when it comes to so-called Big Data, among which is the growing mass of personal data collected by various social media sites. The availability of this Big Data has been seen as the new currency, and its mining and analysis has become the subject of much research. However, the lack of contextualisation has been flagged by danah boyd (2010), who stated that “Just Because It is Accessible Doesn’t Mean Using It is Ethical” (Section “Methodologically sound approaches to big data”, para. 5).

The conceptual gaps identified by Zimmer (2010) were thus all obvious throughout the research. However, despite a concerted ethical reflection, and the integration of ethical principles in the research design, issues emerged as soon as the presence of the researcher became known to the participants. These would eventually be separated into the two groups mentioned earlier, the first group, built around the first blogger I had encountered, Saila, included her friends Homi, Corcra, Planet and Disco (girls) as well as Brightears and

Fry (boys). The other group, for the purposes of my study, was of two girls, Myriam and Jen, although they regularly interacted with a large number of other bloggers.

5. When public is not public

In autumn 2005, I had identified *LiveJournal* as the place where I was most likely to find young Irish bloggers. The previously popular *diaryland.com* counted no Irish blogs any longer, and it proved extremely difficult to find blogs hosted on the *Blogger* platform or on personal sites. Some of the blogs I had studied in the past had now migrated to *LiveJournal*, which offered an internal search engine. In October 2005, I created a blog on LiveJournal, and wrote my first entry. This was a public entry, as would be all the entries I would write until I selected the blogs for the study. The first entries were thus personal reflections on my budding research, and little stories about my children or domestic misadventures; I had simultaneously created a second blog on the *Blogger* platform, and for the first year, I simply published the same posts on two different platforms.

Saila's blog was the first blog I started reading, eventually navigating from her posts to her readers' blogs, following the links embedded in their user-names. I also started reading Jen's blog, following links to Myriam's blog. Throughout this phase of the research, the act of reading a blog became laden with meaning which I had not envisaged, more similar to the act of lurking than reading, as I was to discover when I started communicating with the authors. The word 'lurking' entered the internet language very early on, from the time of MOOs¹ and MUDs² and discussion boards, and refers to the act of reading without notifying the others of your presence. This 'reading alone' act is seen at best as very bad manners, at worst as slightly sinister or threatening to the author or the group. It does also signal texts on the web as a conversation, where

1. MUD Object Oriented

2. Multi-User Dungeon

all protagonists should make themselves known and participate. The blogs I discovered through the search engine and that I started reading were all publicly available to readers, but although I read, I did not comment until late in November 2006.

In November 2006, I wrote an entry on my blog which explained my presence on the platform and referred to my research and planned research questions. The same week, I commented on a number of blogs, from both groups, asking the authors if they would like to participate in the study, with a link to the explanatory blog entry. Whilst in ethnographic terms, this was an entry into the field, to the young people whose blogs I had been reading, it felt like de-lurking. The reactions to my presence varied: Saila and Corcra, whose blogs had a mixture of locked entries and public entries, agreed immediately to participate in the study, and both of them engaged in some conversation with me; Saila sent me an email immediately, and I responded through email as well, Corcra responded on her blog, but also gave me her email address in her response, so that any further conversations could take place outside the blog. Both wrote about their participation and about the study itself. In the event, I chose not to correspond by email, but to keep all communication on the same platform, through the *LiveJournal* internal messaging function.

I very rarely commented on the blogs after this first contact, so as not to intrude in personal conversations between the bloggers and their friends. Instead, all communication about the thesis and questions related to the research were posted on my own *LiveJournal* blog, I followed those entries with private messages to the young bloggers, with a link to the entry in question. In the first group, Saila and Corcra responded to all the messages, which were often ignored by the other bloggers. Homi's blog was also a mixture of private and public, and she also gave me access to all her entries, but she kept this initial communication in the comments section of her blog. All of them also included me in their Friends lists, thus granting me access to their private, locked entries. Planet, Disco and Brightears, whose blogs were public, engaged as well in their responses, and left their settings unchanged, as well as Fry, whose blog was mostly public. The two girls who form the second

group both accepted immediately and gave access to most of their private entries, although Jen did point out that “anything really personal is squirreled away in filters anyhow”, from which I assumed that some entries were not meant for my eyes.

Table 1. GROUP 1 - Public/private settings before and after first contact

Name	Gender	Public/ private entries	Response	Public/ private entries after contact
Saila	F	Mixed public/private	Yes	No change Private entries opened to researcher
Homi	F	Mostly private	Yes	No change Private entries opened to researcher
Brightears	M	Public	Yes	No change
Planet	F	Public	Yes	No change
Fry	M	Mixed public/private	Yes	No change Private entries opened to researcher
Disco	F	Public	Yes	No change
Corcra	F	Private	Yes	No change Private entries opened to researcher

These final participants were not however the only bloggers whom I initially contacted. Within the group of friends named on profile pages, a further seven either declined or declined to answer. Two gave negative responses, both in answer to my comment; one explained that she had links to my university, and immediately locked her journal, posting a “Friends Only” page, with a black and white picture and the words “I am a private person, this journal is now Friends Only”. Another girl simply answered “hem, no thanks”, but left her journal setting public. Five bloggers ignored the comment and request and never answered, either on their comments page or on my blog. One girl did not answer, but locked her journal, with no announcement on the first page. One boy did not answer me directly, but instead locked his journal and posted a “Friends Only” page, which consisted of a black rectangle with two white letters: F.O., which I took to be a message to the researcher who had caused him

to lock his journal. One other boy ignored the message, left his old public entries as they were, but subsequently set all other entries as private, and the last three bloggers ignored the message and continued as they had before. I never included any of their entries in the study, yet their behaviour on first contact caused me to reflect deeply on ethical issues in research and also on the question of privacy, which became a crucial question in this research. Whereas none of the bloggers who agreed to participate in the study changed their privacy level after being contacted, as outlined in [Table 1](#) above, this was not the case for those who refused or ignored my request: four of those remaining seven bloggers changed their settings, ‘locking’ their journal or part of their journal, as outlined in [Table 2](#) below. This reactive take up of the privacy affordance seemed from the start to signify the emerging digital literacy of the young people involved, who had known about the lock facility but had not identified or seen the need for the privacy affordance until the sudden appearance of my comments and messages, seen as the intrusion of an unwanted reader.

Table 2. Public/private settings after refusals

Name	Gender	Public/private entries	Response	Public/ private entries after contact
LJSweet.	F	Public	No	Private
LJBigSam	M	Public	No answer	Private
LJSparrow	F	Public	No answer	Private
LJLuciakiss.	F	Public	No answer	No change
LJBalin	F	Public	No	No change
LJStevenSmith.	M	Public	No answer	No change
LJBudda	M	Public	No answer	No change for old entries. Private for new entries

My presence, not only as a researcher, but as an adult and a stranger, had attributes of voyeurism. Even the most enthusiastic participants asked me where and how I had ‘found’ them. The explanation of my selection methods was however accepted as a valid one. Nevertheless, my presence was a catalyst for some, notably those who did not want to participate, as it influenced their privacy levels and indeed changed their expectations of privacy on the *LiveJournal* platform, if not online in general.

One of the grey areas comes from the nature of the blog as life-writing. Whereas authenticity may not be an issue in young people's blogs, too much truth may be one. Ethical issues online are often played around the complex and shifting concept of privacy, which in blogs can be linked to life narratives. Eakin (2004) reflects on the ethics of life-writing in relation to others:

“because we live our lives in relation to others, our privacies are largely shared, making it hard to demarcate the boundary where one life leaves off and another begins” (Eakin, 2004, p. 8).

“While our lives are increasingly on display in public, the ethics of presenting such revelations remains largely unexamined” (Eakin, 2004, p. 1).

These issues also impact on research: whereas I asked for consent from the bloggers that I had selected, and I kept an open communication channel with them, I was also conscious of the presence of others in the text, and my own text has removed the names of anyone mentioned, as well as place names which might make the bloggers and their friends identifiable. The grey area is that of the active readers who comment on the blogs; it would have been impossible to contact each and every one of them and ask them for consent; consent was only sought by the blogger, the ‘owner’ of the place as it were. As for the commenters who are not part of the sample, their names were thus replaced by initials, but their comments were nevertheless quoted.

6. Conclusion

Contextual gaps and ethical grey areas have been illustrated here by the reactions of young bloggers after first contact with an unknown adult, the researcher. Even though privacy settings existed on the platform, it can be argued that the affordance of privacy is at times a hidden affordance, thus not necessarily obvious to young users. The identification and realisation of privacy affordances often necessitated a first experience where the need for

managing privacy was made obvious, as in an encounter with an unexpected person. The realisation of these affordances can thus be assimilated to different levels of digital literacies, which should be kept in mind by researchers.

As a researcher, I felt that the guiding concept should be that of contextual integrity introduced by Nissenbaum (2010) to account for the puzzling issue of privacy in public, but which can be adapted to the area of internet research:

“The underlying thesis is that social activity occurs in contexts and is governed by context-relative norms. Among these, informational norms govern the flow of information about a subject from one party to another, taking account of the capacities (or roles) in which the parties act, the types of information, and the principles under which this information is transmitted among the parties. We can think of contextual integrity as a metric, preserved when informational norms within a context are respected and violated when they are contravened” (Nissenbaum, 2010, p. 14).

Contextual integrity calls for the *appropriate* flow of information, in a context-sensitive manner, reminiscent of the call of the AoIR ethics working group for sensitivity to the expectations of the digital venue. An ethical reflection does not however stop at the design stage of the research, or the choice of relational boundaries. All through the research process, there appear instances and events which call on the researcher to reflect again and again on the ethics of her research.

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