“At the ethical intersections: information, computing, internet research”

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Abstract

The **purpose** of this Viewpoint is to introduce a new collaboration between the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) and the *Journal of Information, Communication and Ethics in Society*, using historical, comparative, and ethics-based **approaches**. **Findings**: the collaboration is catalyzed by central interests shared between AoIR and *JICES* – namely, in the ethical and social impacts of the internet: the collaboration accordingly aims to bring research and reflection developed for the AoIR conferences to the *JICES'* readership. The **value** of this collaboration is considerable, as it promises extensive new cross-fertilization between the two communities. The Viewpoint begins with a brief overview of the collaboration's initiation by Prof Simon Rogerson and its logistics over the next two years. Following a general review of Information and Computing Ethics (ICE) and Intercultural Information Ethics (IIE), an overview of ethical considerations fostered by AoIR is offered, focusing on the development of Internet Research Ethics (IRE), especially its most recent expression in an IRE 3.0 (franzke et al., 2020).

Keywords: Internet research ethics (IRE), virtue ethics, care ethics, deontology, utilitarianism, cross-cultural ethics, ethical pluralism, ethics review boards, Big Data, social media, AI

Introduction

Prof Simon Rogerson has initiated a new collaboration between *JICES* and the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR). Now 20 years on, AoIR has included attention to the ethical dimensions of internet-facilitated technologies and communication from its beginnings. In particular, AoIR has established three Ethics Working Groups (EWGs) charged with developing guidelines and resources for internet research ethics (IRE) in both the humanities and the social

sciences. The most recent of these – denoted as IRE 3.0 – built and expanded on the previous two documents and was approved by the AoIR membership on October 6, 2019, during the annual conference in Brisbane, Australia. Additional ethics panels and presentations continued the AoIR tradition of examining other pressing ethical challenges affiliated with specific forms of internet research. In both ways, AoIR thus fosters reflection on and resolution of the ethical and social impacts of the internet: as Prof. Rogerson has observed, these resonate well with the aims of *JICES*, namely to

> …promote thoughtful dialogue regarding the wider social and ethical issues related to the planning, development, implementation and use of new media and information and communication technologies. Drawing from a wide authorship it provides necessary interdisciplinary, culturally and geographically diverse works essential to understanding the impacts of the pervasive new media and information and communication technologies. (Rogerson, personal communication, 2019)

Hence Prof Rogerson, I and the AoIR Executive Committee have agreed to collaborate with *JICES* in order to bring relevant AoIR ethics work to the attention of *JICES* readers. We plan to do so in two ways. First, future issues will include papers drawn from the recent AoIR conference that focus on specific ethical matters. Second, a forthcoming Call for Papers will announce a special issue of *JICES* developed in conjunction with the AoIR 2020 conference in Dublin, Ireland, October 28-31.

To set the stage for these developments and collaborations, in the following I offer some remarks on the historical development of the AoIR ethics initiatives against the backdrop of 20+ years of interrelated work in Information and Communication Ethics (ICE) and Intercultural Information Ethics (IIE). I will then briefly characterize recent ethics work from AoIR 2019, followed by the main developments and foci of IRE 3.0.

What 20+ years of ethics look like

Twenty years in Information and Computing Ethics (ICE), Intercultural Information Ethics (IIE – e.g., Capurro, 2016), and related fields is a *very* long time. To state the obvious: the rate of change of the technological and affiliated developments and transformations that drive much of

our reflections and deliberations only continues to accelerate. Simultaneously, digital technologies – certainly including computational and network technologies, but extending through everything from health-tracking devices through smart phones, smart appliances, voice-operated digital assistants to the emerging Internet of Things (IoT) – thereby continue their diffusion into every nook and cranny of our lifeworlds: so much so that information philosopher Luciano Floridi has famously declared that we inhabit an "infosphere" that constitutes a new sort of lifeworld – our *OnLife*, a further neologism underscoring that what may have once been distinct "life online" and "life offline" are now (more or less) seamlessly interwoven (Floridi 2015; cf. Ess 2020, 7).

Last but certainly not least: the various ethical reflections, dialogues and debates inspired and required by these developments have likewise morphed and transformed. In particular, in the past five years or so, the once all but impermeable disciplinary and vocational walls separating philosophers and applied ethicists from our colleagues in computer science, network engineering, design, informatics, and so on have been bridged by remarkable new coalitions and transformations. Increasingly, it is the technology professionals who insist on ethical perspectives as central to their work – and in an ever-more sophisticated ethical vocabulary. In contrast with the straightforward *utilitarianism* undergirding such (in)famous approaches to, e.g., autonomous vehicles by way of the Trolley problem – recent work by network engineers, system designers, AI specialists, and so on invoke *care ethics* (Rambukkana, 2019), most especially *virtue ethics* (IEEE 2019) as well as *deontology* (cf. Dignum, 2019, pp. 37-39).

Not surprisingly, reaching a 20-year – or even a 25-year – milestone against such a backdrop inspires important retrospectives (Stahl & Ess, 2015; *Javnost-The Public*, 2018; Rogerson, 2019). Such retrospectives, moreover, are not simply of antiquarian interest. At the same time, these help map out historical terrains and foundations that are essential for our understanding the states of the art of ICE, IIE, and so on.

So it is that the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) has likewise reached a 20-year milestone – broadly as a professional association that has grown and flourished since its first conference in Lawrence, Kansas, in 2000. At the same time, since its inception AoIR has

welcomed ethical reflection generally, e.g., in the form of papers and panels accepted for presentation in its annual conferences. Moreover, AoIR centrally supported a systematic development of Internet Research Ethics (IRE). A series of Ethics Working Groups have now developed and published three primary documents aimed to assist researchers, students, members of ethical review boards (e.g., Institutional Review Boards in the US, ethical review boards in the UK, and so on) in coming to grips with the distinctive challenges and dilemmas of internet-facilitated research. The first document, IRE 1.0, culminated two years' work by a highly interdisciplinary committee representing multiple countries and cultural domains, and stands as the foundational document for its two successors (Ess and the AoIR ethics working committee, 2002). The development of IRE 2.0 was catalyzed by the emergence of social media, the mobility revolution, and the initial stages of Big Data approaches to internet research (Markham & Buchanan, 2012; Ess, 2017). Following a development process of three years and focusing especially on the ethical challenges of more mature Big Data approaches, including the increasing role and use of AI and Machine Learning technologies, the most recent document, IRE 3.0, was approved by the AoIR membership on October 6, 2019 (franzke et al 2020). Both IRE 2.0 and IRE 3.0 build on IRE 1.0 and are considered by AoIR as amendments to and expansions of IRE 1.0.

Why is any of this of interest to JICES readers? Broadly, as we have seen, JICES and AoIR share central interests in the ethical and social impacts of the internet. Moreover, IRE generally represents a highly practical approach within ICE and IIE. To begin with, IRE is spawned by the very real-world ethical challenges faced by empirically-oriented researchers across multiple disciplines seeking to understand the ever-growing universe of internet-facilitated communication and all that it entails in our lifeworlds. At the same time, IRE is deeply rooted in the empirical in a second way: the development of IRE from 1.0 to 3.0 has been driven in very large measure by constant responses from researchers as well as ethical review boards as to what works and what doesn't in both initial and subsequent formulations of IRE. In these ways, IRE is a specific field within ICE and IIE that offers JICES readers not simply a specific set of foci, ethical challenges and their possible resolutions, relevant resources and concrete examples: IRE does so precisely in ways essentially shaped by sharp focus on the cultural differences that are

inescapable in a world inextricably interconnected by computational and networked technologies – and by constant testing through real-world application.

To introduce the AoIR ethics work to *JICES* readers, I now turn to an overview of AoIR and ethics.

AoIR and ethics

AoIR has consistently fostered attention to diverse ethical and social dimensions of internet-facilitated communication since its inception. In 2019, a number of panels and presentations offered representative samples of such reflection. As a first example, Sal Humphreys examined "The Challenges of Ethical Data Use for Commercial Enterprises" (2019). Humphreys described the effort of a commercial games company "to create a framework of ethical principles and guidelines in relation to their use of consumer data" (2019). This initially promising effort was aborted as having "no commercial value" – but Humphreys was nonetheless able to further explore "the broader context of surveillance capitalism, the logics of neo-liberal individualism and economic rationalism as played out at the micro-level of an individual company" (2019).[1]

As a second example, Jayne C. Lammers et al expanded upon the work of Michele Knobel's work on "bearers of moral consequence", defined as "groups of people or communities most directly affected by ethical decisions in a given study" (Knobel 2003, p. 188) – to now include researchers as well. Lammers et al argued that researchers must more fully develop their ethical decision-making abilities in the pursuit of their research, first of all for the sake of fostering "the trustworthiness of science and research" (2019). This work thus directly reinforces a basic AoIR emphasis on the ethical responsibilities of researchers as well as offers fruitful contributions to the larger literatures on trust and ICTs (e.g., Ess, forthcoming).

And even if "ethics" did not appear in their titles, additional presentations offered material and insights of deepest relevance to our shared concerns with ethical and social impacts of the internet. For example, a panel on "Technology-facilitated abuse: How tech is transforming coercion, control, and violence" examined how ICTs facilitate domestic and sexual violence – primarily against women, including migrant women. Cyber stalking, location-tracking and image-based abuse are novel forms of violence that force the development of new

approaches and counter-strategies – including in the domain of *design* of ICTs (Tanczer et al, 2019). As is often the case within AoIR, the panel rested on underlying ethical commitments to equality and gender equality, as well as to basic human rights more broadly – coupled with an implicit but clear ethical imperative to protect, if not enhance those rights.

AoIR and IRE: 20 years of work

In addition to these characteristic explorations of the internet's ethical and social impacts, AoIR has fostered from its inception the development of research ethics guidelines specific to the distinctive contexts, methods, research questions, and the affordances of internet-facilitated communication *per se*. Building on earlier, more episodic efforts, the first set of guidelines was developed over two years by a committee of 22 persons representing both diverse disciplines as well as cultural / national origins – including non-Western countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, and Japan (Ess and The Association of Internet Researchers Ethics Working Committee, 2002, [referred to as IRE 1.0 hereafter], p. 28). These first guidelines established a number of foundations for IRE, beginning with roots in the classic Human Subjects Protections' norms of respect for persons (as autonomous beings), beneficence, and justice (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979, pp. 4-6). These norms in turn ground basic requirements such as minimizing risk; ensuring subjects' anonymity, confidentiality, and privacy; acquiring informed consent, and so on. At the same time, however, these norms and practices from the pre-internet world did not always mesh well with research into online environments, e.g., as the latter often involved "virtual subjects" whose real-world identities were intentionally masked behind pseudonyms and avatars – and/or as *humanistic* approaches to internet research often rested on very different premises from the *social science* approaches that typically invoked Human Subjects Protections. As a start, literary analyses of online exchanges, web pages, etc. presumed an intentional *authorship* that demanded recognition of the authors, beginning with rights to copyright of their work, in stark contrast with default presumptions of the importance of protecting subjects' rights to privacy, anonymity, etc.

Moreover, determining what "privacy" might mean, much less how it should be protected, encountered new challenges in these domains – challenges that, of course, have only

become more fraught and complex in the intervening years, beginning with the rise of “Big Data” technologies and AI-driven technologies that make perfect anonymization no longer a technical possibility. Nonetheless, our collaborative experience – both as researchers and as ethicists – is that the grounds established in IRE 1.0 have proven to be fruitful and endure through the development of the succeeding ethics guidelines. Very broadly, there is now a community-wide consensus, based on our nearly 20 years’ of experience, that incorporating ethical reflection into our research methods from the outset is not only *instrumentally* valuable to securing needed approval from ethics review boards and, increasingly, research funding sources: even better, the conjunction of ethics and method consistently leads to *better* research (cf. Markham 2006).

Moreover, IRE 1.0 – as demanded by the internet as a global medium – emphasized continual attention to cross-cultural differences in ethical frameworks and traditions. Doing so leads immediately, of course, to the central challenge of what to do in the face of competing, sometimes apparently irreconcilable differences between these traditions as they apply to questions evoked in internet research – beginning precisely with questions of privacy. As is now well established, our conceptions of what counts as privacy and whether it is a positive good or right to be protected, or a negative good to be avoided, turn directly on our basic conceptions of selfhood. Most briefly, modern Western conceptions of the self as primarily an *individual* autonomy ground our justifications for privacy as a basic right in democratic polities: in traditional societies, by contrast, more *relational* senses of selfhood regard the individual desire to be apart or hidden from the larger collective to be a suspicious matter wanting to hide something shameful or dirty from others (Ess, 2019b, pp. 74-77). These differences may seem irreconcilable and hence fatal barriers to any global internet research ethics – or global ICE or IIE more broadly. But IRE 1.0 marks out *ethical pluralism* as an approach to resolving these differences on both theoretical and practical levels. Ethical pluralism argues that these sorts of differences may be differently understood – i.e., as diverse interpretations or applications of a shared norm (Ess, 2019b, pp. 80-81). As a recent example, Soraj Hongladarom (2017) has documented that notions of informed consent in Thailand, as a collective or more relational culture, work differently to those in the West, as presuming subjects as more

individual. Nonetheless, he argues that these differences may be understood and practiced in terms of a shared norm – namely, of protecting rights to consent whether understood as primarily a collective or individual matter (cf. Ess, 2019a, pp. 7-8).

Finally, IRE 1.0 articulated a set of foundational assumptions regarding how we are to "do" ethics per se. In contrast with more "top-down" or rule-driven approaches to ethics that prevailed at the time (cf. Rogerson 2019), we argued to complement these with a "bottom up" approach grounded first of all in the assumption – characteristic of both Aristotelian and Confucian ethics, for example – that (more or less) *all of us* are enculturated ethical beings. Specifically (more or less) all of us – not just those of us privileged to study ethics as philosophers and professionals, but certainly also researchers, our subjects, and so on – come to these deliberations already fully experienced with making (usually) good ethical decisions. In particular, invoking Plato's model of the *cybernetes*, the steersman or pilot who exemplifies an embodied form of *reflective* ethical judgment – *phronēsis*, also translated as "practical wisdom" – our ethical judgments are marked by the central capacity for self-correction when we discern that we have made what turns out to be a bad judgment (Ess, 2019a, pp. 8-10). This approach further entails ethical reflection as grounded in the fine-grained details of specific contexts, and thereby a process of collaborative and intersubjective dialogue aimed to make explicit our primary norms and assumptions for the sake of discerning the best possible resolutions to a specific ethical difficulty. This means, finally, the central role of *asking the right questions*, coupled with careful attention to discerning which ethical frameworks (including deontology and utilitarianism, but increasing care ethics, virtue ethics, as well as global ethical traditions are most relevant, such as Confucian ethics, Buddhist ethics, African ethics, and so on (cf. Ess, 2019a, pp. 10-13)

Hence the main bodies of IRE 1.0, 2.0 (Markham and Buchanan, 2012), and 3.0 (franzke et al, 2020) are an increasingly sophisticated and nuanced set of *questions* that seek to guide researchers, both individually and collectively, into such dialogical and reflective processes of deliberation that often help discern resolutions to their specific ethical challenges.

To be sure, these questions are driven in good measure by constantly changing technologies as well as research questions and methods. IRE 1.0, to start with, was directed

towards “email, chatrooms, webpages, various forms of ‘instant messaging,’ MUDs and MOOs, USENET newsgroups, audio/video exchanges, etc.” (2002, p. 3). These were soon displaced, if not eliminated, first by the emergence of social media (e.g., MySpace and then Facebook) from ca. 2005, followed by the “mobility revolution” from ca. 2008 onward, and, finally, the first appearances of both “Big Data” technologies and correlative research methods. These led to the development of IRE 2.0 (Markham and Buchanan, 2012). The growth of Big Data, coupled with growing global interest in IRE, were primary catalysts for the inauguration of IRE 3.0 in 2016.

Again, IRE 3.0 builds on its predecessors, beginning with its expansion of “dissemination ethics” developed in IRE 2.0. Dissemination ethics helped make the point that the ethical challenges and requirements at the beginning of a research project may be importantly different to those encountered in the final stages of conference presentation and publication. For example, in a Big Data project that collects (“scrapes”) personally identifiable data from tens to hundreds of thousand social media profiles, acquiring informed consent from each profile owner for the use of this data is manifestly impossible. But as long as that data is kept securely, neither is informed consent necessary. Rather, such consent can become necessary in the publication stage when, e.g., a researcher may want to quote or refer to personal or sensitive information about a given individual. But such quotes and references are likely to be a very modest number – e.g., between 5 and 30: seeking informed consent at this stage is hence more than doable (franzke et al, 2020, pp. 10f.) IRE 3.0 expands on this point, so as to distinguish between five research stages that may entail distinctive ethical challenges and resolutions – namely, Initial research design, Initial research processes, Analyses, Dissemination, and Close of the project – including the destruction of research data and related materials (franzke et al, 2020, pp. 9f.).

A primary novelty in IRE 3.0 addresses the increasing need to *protect the researchers* in addition to protecting subjects. This need has always been recognized in certain forms of risky research, e.g., infiltrating terrorist or other extremist groups. But in an era of networked communications – and increasingly savvy users – such subjects have much easier access to researchers as themselves vulnerable persons in turn. This was exemplified in the phenomenon

of “#Gamergate”, as both female game researchers and journalists began to call out the toxic masculinity of gamer cultures. This was met with death threats against the researchers, “doxing” (publishing private information about the researchers so as to target them with barrages of hate speech and threats on social media – as well as in their real-world lives), and so on (Massanari, 2016;). In this light, IRE 3.0 includes resources for protecting researchers' privacy and safety as well (franzke et al, 2020, p. 11; Douglas 2020).

Finally, IRE 3.0 is accompanied by a number of companion resources that delve more deeply into specific areas. To begin with Anja Bechmann and Bendert Zevenbergen (2020) address the highly technical dimensions of “AI and Machine Learning” in internet research, following the “General Structure for Ethical Analysis” offered in IRE 3.0, beginning with attending to the stages of research (franzke et al., 2020, pp. 12-23). Elisabetta Locatelli (2020) address the big data-specific issues of “Academy/Industry partnership and corporate data”. Finally, aline shakti franzke (2020), one of the co-chairs and primary contributors to IRE 3.0, also provides a chapter on “Feminist Research Ethics” as specifically addressing Big Data issues and questions.

Both individually and collectively, these resources – including the extensive reference lists – will be of interest to *JICES* readers who want to explore an increasingly prominent domain of applied ethics, one that becomes all the more relevant to our shared concerns with the ethical and social impacts of technologies as internet-facilitated technologies and communication become increasingly central to and diffused throughout our lives. Again, ethics as practiced and articulated here are distinctive as they are clearly focused on solving the real-world problems of researchers across a wide range of disciplines and cultural traditions – and as they are honed and refined precisely by what works, and what doesn't, in the *praxis* of research itself.

Concluding remarks

And so, here we are. I hope this Viewpoint has succeeded in its primary purpose of introducing AoIR and its ethics work to JICES readers – both for its own sake and as a way of grounding, first, the publication in subsequent issues of ethics-oriented work from the AoIR 2019 conference in Brisbane, Australia (October 2-6). In addition, we will organize one or more ethics panels as

part of the AoIR 2020 conference in Dublin, Ireland (October 28-31) to form the content of a special theme issue of *JICES*. Please keep an eye out for the Call for Papers to appear soon.

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[1] (For additional presentations in this panel, see “PaperSession-14: Ethics”, https://www.conftool.org/aoir2019/index.php?page=browseSessions&form_session=330#paperID190 (accessed 31 December 2019)