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The ethics of internet research and the implications for student projects

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There are numerous methods that lend themselves to internet research and although, in the main, these methodologies are not new, they do include new perspectives on established information gathering techniques. This has implications for nurse educationalists, both those who supervise students through the dissertation and thesis process and those who are, themselves, research active. This paper begins the debate about how nurse education will address the ethical issues of internet research? One of the key issues for consideration is the pragmatic concerns of around concepts such as representativeness and identity; how illustrative of the whole target population are the internet users who respond to online questionnaires for example? The notion of participant identity however can be contended to be more of an issue in internet research with social media seen as particularly susceptible to this problem. Social media users often create wholly new identities and personalities for themselves depending upon their level of immersion in cyberspace, which may form a confounding variable for the researcher. Many university courses, especially those in health and at undergraduate level encourage students to mine social media sites for research data on the ground that such data is in the public domain. However, definitions of 'public' and 'private' do not translate so neatly to cyberspace. Cyberspace defies locality and online interaction cannot be defined as either public or private, but both public and private, 'public' and 'private' are mere metaphors when applied to cyberspace. Although there is a plethora of ethical guidelines in existence, few of them actually address the specific ethical issues that are a characteristic of cyberspace research. Herein lies the challenge for nurse education. Nurse educators and researchers, whilst well versed in more traditional methods of research ethics may, however, lack the skills and experience in internet use and the awareness to fully grasp the implications of and presentation of ethical issues in any given internet environment.

Biography

Carol Haigh has over 30 years' experience of Academia and Healthcare Settings within the United Kingdom. She has acted as an Expert Advisor to the Royal College of Nursing and other health related charities. She is the Chair of a Local Ethics Committee and maintains strong links with the wider clinical disciplines facilitating improvements in patient engagement and experience using technology and social media. She has a special interest in ethics and health technology from a user perspective and is Co-Instigator of the digital human/digital health nexus. She has publications about research and digital story telling.

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