

# Making ethical decisions in an online context: Reflections on using blogs to explore narratives of experience

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## Case Study

### Gap Year Narratives

- Representations of gap year experiences
- Blogs as narratives, the 'story'
- How were these stories 'framed' ?



# Debates in online research ethics

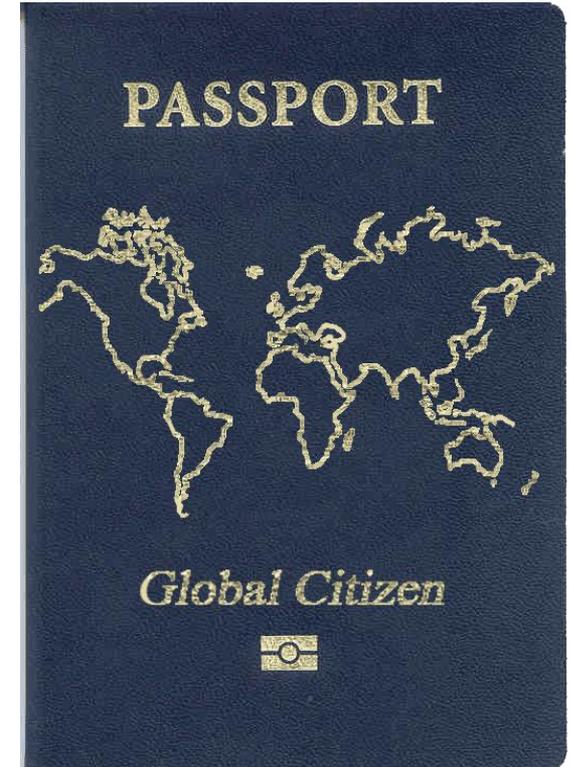
Dealing with a (relatively) new environment

- Medium as formative with new phenomena emerging
- New dilemmas
- Are new ethical procedures required?
- Or should fundamental principles remain unchanged?

## Key decisions

### Difficulties faced in the gap year study

- Were the gap year blogs public or private?
- Were the gap year bloggers subjects or authors?
- Issues of
  - Informed consent
  - Privacy
  - Anonymity





## Blogs as public or private?

### Expectations of privacy and personal information

- An unequal power relationship
- Intended audiences
- Expectations of privacy
- Technological vs psychological privacy (Frankel and Siang 1999)
- Natural vs normative privacy (Moor 2004)
- Web 2.0 and shifts in sense and values of privacy (Beer and Burrows 2007)
- Full name, personal photographs, email address, intimate reflections...
- Whose responsibility to protect personal information in the public domain?

## Bloggers as subjects or authors?

A choice between preserving anonymity and giving credit

- A 'person in space' or a text with a 'person as author' (Ess and AoIR 2002)?
- All bloggers contacted for interview
- Traceability of online data
- Ownership of material
- Implications for informed consent
- Awareness of unknown readers Whiteman (2007)?
- 'Err on the side of caution' (BSA 2002)

## My approach

### Setting-dependent and sensitive to context

- Concern with representations of experience in communications, not subjects
- Informed consent not required
- Indications of unknown readers / public nature of blog
- Blogs personal, but not private
- Did not 'cite' blogs
- 'Moderate disguise' (Bruckman 2002)
- Privileging protection of identity over providing credit to authors (Hookway 2008)

## Reflections

Did I do the right thing?



- Should I have used the blogs without consent?
- Should I have provided links to the blogs?
- Should I have paraphrased the blogs, rather than quote them?
- Should I have not contacted the bloggers at all?
- Did I end up with an unsatisfactory middle ground?

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