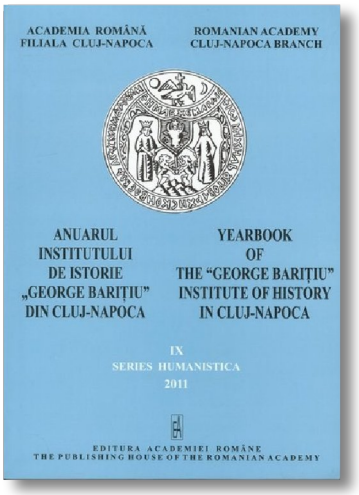

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THE ETHICAL CHALLENGES OF RESEARCHING PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN'S ONLINE ACTIVITIES: A NEW ETHICAL PARADIGM FOR THE VIRTUAL ETHNOGRAPHER?[1]

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Abstract. *The intention of this theoretical paper is to explore a range of common ethical paradigms with regard to researching the educational potential of web-based communication tools. This work has evolved out of research into the educational use of online communities within the English primary school context.*

The main argument within this paper is that the virtual ethnographer faces a number of ethical challenges which are the product of the complex interplay between three key factors; the attitudes towards web-based technologies adopted by the researcher; those adopted by the participants and; the particular opportunities and idiosyncrasies afforded by the process of virtual ethnography itself. The paper examines this interplay beginning with an exploration of the interface between researchers and researched; how can the researcher justify their work ethically within a culture of no risk towards the educational use of web-based communication tools? Classroom practitioners and the wider educational establishment are often understandably circumspect in their willingness to explore the potential of web-based technologies due to certain well publicised risks surrounding the use of such technologies as chat rooms. However could the rate of children's adoption of such technologies outside of formal education render the educational establishment's wariness of these tools, ethically untenable?

Another particular ethical challenge faced by the virtual ethnographer, I will go onto argue, evolves out of the very nature of web-based technologies and the opportunities they might yield. For example, I will explore how the affordances within the virtual field of study take the debate over covert and overt methods into new realms with such distinctions becoming increasingly difficult to apply within virtual arenas where there is a total absence of physical presence and the visual cues we take for granted within face-to-face settings.

The paper draws upon a range of contributors to the ethical debate in educational research and calls for a new ethical awareness amongst educational researchers, in which

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some of the common ethical standpoints within the educational research community are re-evaluated from the perspective of potentially new research methods afforded by web-based technologies. It concludes by expressing the need for a new dynamic ethical relativism in order for educational research to keep up with fast-changing technologies and shifting perceptions of their use within the wider community.

Key words: *virtual ethnography, online community, ethics, relativism, overt, covert, Internet, e-learning, primary education*.

1. ANOMALIES BETWEEN POTENTIAL AND PRACTICE

A key argument of this paper is that the interaction between the researcher's attitudes to the potential of web-based communication technologies and their participants' attitudes can lead to specific ethical challenges within the field, particularly when these attitudes are seen to conflict (Fig. 1).

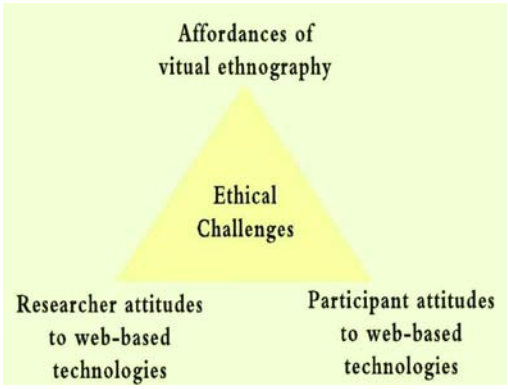

Fig. 1. Theoretical model of ethical viewpoints.

So what are some of the common stances taken towards such technologies within the research community? Since the inception of the Internet and increased access within schools there has been persistent optimism regarding the potential of web-based technologies, and online communities in particular, to affect radical change within current patterns of schooling and education. Harasim[3] highlight the borderless nature of online learning whilst Scardemmalia and Bereiter[4] illustrate the potential to frame learning much more as a collaborative pursuit; information normally stored in individual exercise books can now be shared within collaborative online workspaces allowing for

[3] *** *Online Education: Perspectives on a New Environment,* L. Harasim (ed.), 1990, New York: Praeger, 1990.

[4] M. Scardemalia & C. Bereiter, *Adaptation and Understanding: A Case for New Cultures of Schooling*, in: *** *International Perspectives on the Design of Technology Supported Learning Environments*, S. Vosniadon, E. De Corte, R. Gaser, H. Mandl (eds.), New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996.

ongoing development of ideas. The co-construction of knowledge within online communities is also well documented within various studies of higher education and informal settings[5]. Much is made of new opportunities for learners to work collaboratively within virtual environments, sharing information as they take a shared responsibility for the construction of knowledge and understanding. However, in a recent study of primary children's use of an online community[6], whilst there was significant evidence of the potential of web-based communication technologies, their use in school practice was found to be viewed with a high degree of scepticism and suspicion amongst some practitioners. Web-based tools such as chat rooms in particular are commonly – and perhaps understandably in the light of various high profile cases in the media of online paedophile activities – treated with suspicion and scepticism amongst practitioners as is evident from this extract of an interview conducted with a primary school ICT Co-ordinator: "all chat rooms are no no… they don't happen… we don't promote it, well in fact we actively discourage it in every way shape or form. Too many horror stories to even contemplate it."[7]

Such a polarised view is not uncommon and the reference to 'horror stories' reveals a moral dimension within this teacher's opposition to the use of chat rooms as presumably from his perspective the issue of child protection outweighs any possible use of such technologies within school. In other words there is a clear distinction between what is perceived to be right and wrong in this teacher's understanding of his responsibilities as a teacher. Furthermore even when there is some acknowledgement that children may well have access to, and be using such technologies within their leisure time, clear lines may well be drawn concerning educational and leisure use of web-based technologies as can be seen in the following extract taken from a secondary school's Internet Acceptable Use Policy which advises that chat rooms: "are to be used only during student's free time. This does not extend to 'free' periods, which are to be used for private study."[8]

The implication here is that such technology has no place or role within the children's learning. Again, the strength with which this 'advice' is given appears to reveal an underlying ethical foundation as the school clearly identifies such activities as being an issue of right and wrong. The school seems to view the technology as a threat to children's learning and therefore is seen to be acting responsibly by protecting them from the perceived threat. Although not explicit within the guidance given here it could be assumed that the concern here is that children will be socialising online when they ought to be focusing on their school

[5] J. Preece, *Online Communities: Designing Usability*, *Supporting Sociability*, New York: J. Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2000; G. Salmon, *E-tivities: The Key to Active Online Learning*, London: Kogan Page, 2002.

[6] Keith Turvey, *Towards Deeper Learning Through Creativity Within Online Communities in Primary Education*, "Computers and Education", 46:3, 2006, 309–321.

[7] Keith Turvey, *Online communities; to what extent might they be a catalyst for learning and creativity through ICT within primary education*, unpublished MA thesis, University of Brighton, 2004.

[8] http://www.ackworth.w-yorks.sch.uk/aup.html (accessed 01.12.2005).

tasks. This is particularly interesting when one considers the findings of Breen et al[9] who claim that 'leisure use' of ICT should not be discouraged within online learning communities for 'personal and learning uses are impossible to distinguish' to the extent that one 'should recognise the value of blending the academic with the personal'[10]. This void between the potential often associated with such communication technologies within research and the caution or even hostility with which they may be met in practice is problematic ethically for how can the researcher justify their work if there is a potential threat – real or perceived – to children and their right to learn?

The implementation of new web-based communication tools within the classroom does seem to herald new ethical challenges for the educational researcher, whether they are the classroom practitioner developing and investigating their own practice or the outside researcher attempting to conduct an empirical study. Such ethical issues need to be addressed if the educational potential afforded by such technologies is to be realised. Whilst empirical research into the educational use of web-based technologies may well be the key to realising this potential, a failure adequately to address the ethical issues so clearly underlying the examples referred to hitherto can only hinder any progress. In order to tackle these underlying ethical issues it is necessary to consider a range of common ethical standpoints within educational research and then view these from the perspective of the challenges thrown up by new communications technologies.

2. FUZZY ETHICS: LOOKING FOR A STANCE

"Relativity seeks Adjustment; Adjustment is Art. The art of life lies in a constant readjustment to our surroundings"[11]. Furthermore nowhere is it more evident than within our interactions with our surrounding technological world that this relationship is indeed a dynamic one; in a constant state of change. From this perspective the argument in this paper is that ethics and more specifically ethical codes, should serve as safety valves to raise awareness amongst researchers as to the potential repercussions and outcomes, positive and negative, of their actions upon the researched and at times the wider community. That is, the definition of ethics adopted here is distinct from morality being viewed more as a dynamic interplay between various facets of social life in an attempt to come to terms with issues of right and wrong. Furthermore, from this perspective, it is suggested that whilst self constraint may well be the resulting outcome of some ethical dilemma

[9] R. Breen, R. Lindsay, A. Jenkins, P. Smith, *The Role of Information and Communication Technologies in a University Learning Environment*, „Studies in Higher Education", vol. 26 (1), 2001, p. 95–113.

[10] *Ibidem*, p. 117.

[11] Okakura, 1991, cited in: L. Cohen, L. Manion, K. Morrison, *Research Methods in Education*, 5th ed., London: Routledge Falmer, 2003.

within the field, this should not be the point from which to begin. Indeed, some argue that rigidly adhered to ethical codes inhibit much research (Punch)[12]. Similarly, Homan (2004) states that ethical standards are often posited as 'absolutes but must operate relatively'[13]. Whilst ethical codes may well be an essential aspect of social research it is argued here that researchers need to recognise the limitations of various ethical viewpoints when dealing with the complex and often 'messy' reality of social life? For example Punch notes: "The generality of codes often does not help us to make the fine distinctions that arise at the interactional level in participant observation studies where the reality of the field setting may feel far removed from the refinements of scholarly debate and ethical niceties."[14]

Hammersley and Atkinson[15] outline some of the key stances within the field of ethics and an examination of these does illuminate some of the problematic contradictions in the field – virtual or real. I will examine some of these within the virtual context later.

Arguably the most simplistic and naïve position identified by Hammersley and Atkinson is the absolutist stance in which informed consent is believed always to be necessary and rules concerning invasion of privacy are there to be strictly adhered to. The obvious flaw in such a position concerns the problem of how can the researcher continue when it turns out that those being researched are involved in illegal practices? What subjects in such a position would give informed consent? Consequently, the researcher is faced with the paradoxical situation of collusion or breaking the ethical code. Essentially such a situation as this reaches beyond the realm of ethics and into that of morality.

Another viewpoint, which relies heavily upon morality to inform the ethical debate, is occupied by those who maintain that "good research" demands an element of deception and even unethical practice. Those that subscribe to this view believe that: "means which are ethically suspect from one point of view, such as deception, can be justified because they promise to produce a greater good"[16].

However, as Hammersley and Atkinson point out, such a stance is often taken by those researchers investigating 'large economic or state organisations' or investigative journalists. Such large scale deception on behalf of the 'greater good' may well be inappropriate within the realm of classroom based research. This is not to suggest that some level of deception is always avoidable, for it is quite feasible that preliminary findings within the field could illuminate something of interest to the researcher and wider community with which the teacher or educational institution may be uncomfortable. Sanger implies a middle way between the two positions

[12] M. Punch, *Politics and Ethics in Qualitative Research*, in: *** *Handbook of Qualitative Research,* N. K. Denzin, Y. S., Lincoln (eds.), London: Sage, 1994.

[13] R. Homan, *Ethical Considerations*, in: *** *Understanding Research Methods for Social Policy and Practice*, *S.* Becker, and A. Bryman (eds.), Bristol: Policy Press, 2004, p. 153.

[14] M. Punch, *op. cit*., p. 89.

[15] M. Hammersley, P. Atkinson, *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*, London: Routledge, 1995.

[16] *Ibidem*, p. 278.

outlined hitherto. For example, he states: "In our recognition of plural perspectives and contextual ambiguity, we need to convince our audiences that we are coming as clean as we can, when we depict social events."[17]

In other words, Sanger seems to be implying here that some level of deception may be inevitable but that this must be weighed by the researcher in the field in response to the multi-faceted nature of social life. Hammersley and Atkinson point out that from this contextual position, no absolute strategy is possible and whilst serious harm should be avoided, some offence to someone may be inevitable.

Whether one subscribes to the strict adherence of ethical codes or their strict abandonment, both of these positions are based upon a notion of the absolute. Moreover, the notion that the researcher must judge for themselves what is legitimate within the context is similarly, it could be argued, an absolutist viewpoint in that it implies that the researcher is all-knowing and all-seeing. How can we be so certain that the researcher has all of the knowledge they need on which to base their judgments in the field? This becomes even more problematic when one considers that the researcher may well belong to a different culture, social group or gender than those being researched. The researcher may only see and understand from their own particular socio-economic and cultural viewpoint. The stance of 'ethical relativism'[18] demands a much more open relationship between researchers and researched, putting the researched at the centre of the research process and including them within any ethical decisions within the field. Nevertheless a problem with this particular stance could be that there is an implicit assumption that the researched and the researcher share the same goals in relation to the purpose of the research. It is not difficult to imagine various scenarios from this perspective in which the research could become seriously compromised on a number of levels by the conflicting agendas of both the participant researcher and the research participants.

Each of the aforementioned ethical stances explored here have their own merits and problems. The issues outlined with these only serve to highlight Bulmer's assertion that: "There are no cut-and-dried answers to many ethical issues which face the social researcher. Very often the issues involved are multifaceted and there are contradictory considerations at play."[19]

Thus Bulmer claims at best the main priority for the social researcher is to remain 'ethically aware,' implying an openness and responsiveness to the issues and contradictions that might arise within the field. In other words, the researcher needs to maintain a reflexive approach to their work at all stages within the research process. Such a utilitarian approach to ethics enables the researcher to

[17] J. Sanger, *The Compleat Observer? A field Research Guide to Observation*, London: Falmer, 1996, p. 113.

[18] M. Hammersley, P. Atkinson, *op. cit*.

[19] M. Bulmer, *The Ethics of Social Research*, in: *** *Researching Social Life*, N. Gilbert (ed.), London: Sage, 2001, p. 57.

balance the conflicting tensions within the field of study whilst maintaining their obligation to truth; an obligation which may well lead to some element of deception in their work. However, how do these arguments and issues manifest themselves within the virtual field of study? From the perspective of research into the educational use of web-based communication tools what does it mean to be 'ethically aware?'

3. HORROR STORIES ARE FOR THE ETHICALLY UNAWARE

It is clear that the ICT Co-ordinator's comments and attitudes highlighted at the beginning of this paper together with the extract from the Internet Safe-Use Agreement appeal to an absolutist paradigm for their justification. The phrase "too many horror stories" has its roots in the various high profile cases of online grooming or virtual bullying of children reported quite regularly in the media. In a recent case (2005)[20], BBC News reported cases of children using video phones to send intimidating messages and bully their victims. There is a plethora of websites offering advice about the Internet and safety issues but what is the impact of these? It could be argued that whilst performing a valuable role of informing educators and parents, such reports and materials also perpetuate a culture of fear and adversity to risk amongst the educational establishment. Advice is often couched in absolutist terms with a clear sense of what is morally right and wrong as can be seen from this advice from the National Grid for Learning (NGfL)[21]:

> "Note: Although the term 'chat' is probably not appropriate in an educational context we use the term here for ease of reference.
>
> **Guidelines and what to look for**:
> – Children should only be given access to educational chat rooms. The use of 'chat' in an educational context should always be supervised and pupils should be taught to understand the importance of safety within any chat room."

Such guidance is problematic on a number of levels. Firstly, the writers seem to indicate an underlying distaste for the very notion of online 'chat' considering the term itself inappropriate within an educational context. Secondly, they indicate a clear distinction between educational and presumably uneducational chat rooms, when surely any such distinctions can only be arbitrary. Thirdly, although 'supervised' use of such technologies would seem common sense advice there is evidence that I will examine in more detail later to suggest that significant numbers of children are allowed unsupervised access to chat rooms out of school.

[20] Available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/tyne/4314215.stm (accessed February 2006).
[21] Available at: http://safety.ngfl.gov.uk/schools/document.php3?D=d38 (accessed February 2006).

Whilst inappropriate and 'unsafe' uses of new communications technologies *do and should* raise alarm regarding the safe use of the Internet by children, it could also be argued that taking an absolute ethical stance regarding the educational use of such technologies is anachronistic at best and renders children vulnerable to exploitation via these media at worst, as their appropriate and purposeful use of such technologies is left to chance. It is not being suggested here that the current risk averse climate in schools towards such communication technologies is based on prejudice but rather a sense of professional responsibility and a duty of care towards children. This notwithstanding, excluding or creating a difficult climate for the cultivation of certain web-based communications technologies in school due to concerns over safety, could rapidly become untenable as the gap widens between schools that choose to ignore significant new forms of communication and the wider society which continues to embrace them. Furthermore, it is argued here that the shifting perceptions and significance given to different technologies within the wider society require a more flexible and dynamic ethical awareness within the educational establishment. Without recognition of the dynamic nature of technologies and their application there could be a danger that we become ethically blind to both our responsibilities as educators and to the educational potential afforded by new communications technologies. So what evidence is there of changing perceptions and uses of new communications technology?

Much of the data available suggests that the rate of children's assimilation of new web-based communications technologies is high. For example 'over half (55%) of households in Great Britain (12.9 million) could access the Internet from home in July 2005' according to the Office of National Statistics[22]. Furthermore of the activities reported by parents and children, using the Internet rated highly at 67% just behind gaming at 70%. When one also considers the popularity of online multi-user gaming it is clear that the opportunities for children to communicate via the Internet are multifaceted and bound to increase and diversify. Livingstone and Bober (2004) found similar evidence that the rate of access to and use of web-based communication tools is increasing. Moreover in their survey of 9 to 19 year-olds they claim that 72% percent of those who use the Internet daily or weekly reported using the Internet to send and receive e-mails, 55% to send and receive instant messages and 21% to use chat rooms. An earlier study[23] focused on younger children and found that 'within the age group 8 to 11 the use of chat rooms and instant messages increases with age within both samples'[24].

[22] http://www.statistics.gov.uk (accessed December 2005).

[23] R. O'Connell, J. Price, C. Barrow, *Emerging Trends Amongst Primary School Children's Use of the Internet,* 2004, http://image.guardian.co.uk/sys-files/Society/documents/2004/02/06/ Emergingtrendsreport.pdf (accessed 21st September 2004).

[24] R. O'Connell, *Mobile Frontiers: Past, Present and Future Internet Safety*, Conference Proceedings, 2003, http://www.saferinternet.org/downloads/CRU_8.5.03_conference_proceedings.pdf (accessed 22nd September 2004).

It would seem clear from this evidence that the virtual ethnographer does indeed need to constantly readjust to their technological surroundings[25] and not least to the shifting ethical dimensions and challenges encountered within this field. Furthermore whilst they may encounter resistance in the field there is an important ethical debate to be had regarding where the moral high ground lies; with those that seek extend their knowledge and understanding of how new communications technologies may be utilised in education, possibly taking some calculated risks on the way, or with those who seek to resist such developments at all costs in the interests of safety? So what ethical positions if any have been adopted by researchers into the potential of web-based communications technologies and what other ethical challenges arise from the affordances of virtual ethnography (Figure 1)?

4. THE VIRTUAL ETHNOGRAPHER; COVERT VS OVERT?

The a-sited nature of online research – in the sense that there is no physical research site – raises issues regarding its very legitimacy within an ethnographic paradigm[26]. Whilst a full exploration of this important debate is beyond the scope of this paper, it is this a-sitedness which seems to be a factor in the new opportunities offered by Internet based research. The a-sitedness of virtual ethnography, is at the core of the ethical debate, for although the researcher may be involved in face-to-face interviews with their subjects, when online there is the opportunity to observe covertly or "lurk"[27]. It could be argued that regardless of having obtained participants' informed consent, without any of the visual clues normally present in real life interactions the role of the virtual ethnographer is intrinsically covert. Even when actively taking the role of participant observer within an online group discussion forum, the researcher's co-presence may not be immediately obvious to their subjects at periods during the discussion. Furthermore Thomsen et al (1998) point to the ambiguity at the heart of Internet spaces regarding their perceived construction as 'public or private space.' This ambiguity exists also in the real world and is nothing new; Homan (1980)[28] highlighted similar contradictions in his covert study of pentecostal worship noting that 'the distinction between casual and purposeful observation is both arbitrary and difficult to establish for the purpose of ethics'[29]. Thus it can be argued that clear distinctions between covert and overt methods equally

[25] Okakura, 1991, cited in: L. Cohen, L. Manion, K. Morrison, *op. cit*.

[26] C. Hine, *Virtual Ethnography,* 1998, http://www.sosig.ac.uk/iriss/papers/paper16.htm (accessed February 2006); Steven R. Thomsen, Joseph D. Straubhaar and Drew M. Bolyard, *Ethnomethodology and the Study of Online Communities: Exploring the Cyber Streets,* 1998, http://www.sosig.ac.uk/iriss/ papers/paper32.htm (accessed February 2006); A. Lahiff, *Is Ethnography Terrestrial? A Consideration of the Concept of 'Virtual Ethnography' and the Implications for Educational Research*, 1999, http://www.leeds. ac.uk/educol/ documents/000001169.htm

[27] J. Preece, *op. cit*.; G. Salmon, *op. cit*.

[28] R. Homan, *Ethics of Covert Methods*, "British Journal of Sociology", vol. 31(1), 1980, p. 46–63.

[29] *Ibidem*, p. 57.

cannot be made within the realm of the virtual ethnographer. Even when overt methods are actively pursued the lack of the researcher's physical presence within the virtual field of study can still render their activities clandestine.

Other parallels can also be drawn here for in defence of the use of covert methods Homan claims that 'the community which declares "All are welcome" thereby foregoes its privacy'[30]. Within the virtual community one might equally claim that individuals who choose to enter into a dialogue in an arena that is essentially accessible to anyone who might come across it online similarly forgo any claim to privacy. In other words rather than the public domain invading the private, a virtual space where participants choose to discuss private details could be perceived as an invasion of the public by the private. Moreover, this tendency of the virtual field of study to afford surreptitious observations can be viewed as an advantageous situation for the researcher needing to minimise the impact of their actions upon the researched. Thus it is necessary to ask; in what contexts is it ethically acceptable to take advantage of the clandestine opportunities afforded the virtual ethnographer?

5. **HOW GREAT THE GOOD?**

The British Educational Research Association ethical code[31] in educational research permits the use of covert methods whilst asserting that 'voluntary informed consent, before research gets under way, is considered the norm.' The code goes on to advise that researchers should 'avoid subterfuge unless their research specifically requires it to ensure that the appropriate data is collected or that the welfare of the researchers is not put in jeopardy'[32]. Altheide and Johnson point out the 'inevitability of reflexivity for all sense making'[33] and whilst it is not being suggested that the researcher can escape social reality in order to observe from a purely objective viewpoint there may well be good reason for wanting to minimise the impact of the researcher upon the field of study. One such example of this is the research into online grooming carried out by O'Connel who states that: "I have posed in teen chat rooms as an 8, 10 or 12 year old child, usually giving the story that 'my mum and dad are always fighting, children are cruel to me at school and I'm really unhappy'. The aim was to explore paedophile activity in teen chat rooms and get a better insight into online grooming practices."[34]

It should also be stressed here that this was undertaken in consultation with the police and the permission of the Irish government was sought[35]. Clandestine

[30] *Ibidem*.

[31] BERA, *New Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*, 2004, www.bera.ac.uk/ publications/ guides.php (accessed January 2006)

[32] *Ibidem*, p. 6.

[33] D. Altheide, & J. Johnson, J. (1994), *Criteria for Assessing Validity in Qualitative Research*, in: *** *Handbook of Qualitative Research,* N. K. Denzin, Y. S. Licoln (eds.), London: Sage, 1994, p. 496.

[34] R. O'Connell, *Mobile Frontiers: Past, Present and Future Internet Safety*, ..., p. 38.

[35] *Ibidem*.

methods were essential within this research due to the sensitivity of the subject and there is little doubt that the data would have been irrelevant and questionable if overt methods had been employed. Furthermore, such methods are also justifiable from a utilitarian perspective in that whilst deception may have occurred, the knowledge gained about the process of online grooming outweighs any upset caused through subterfuge. The greater good and the need for truth in this example overrule any limitations on deception that might be imposed through the adherence to a particular ethical viewpoint.

So what justification might there be for the deliberate or even inadvertent use of covert methods when researching the educational potential of virtual arenas? Can we claim the advancement of pedagogical understanding with regard to these new virtual spaces as the greater good? Alderson and Morrow take an absolutist viewpoint on this issue claiming that ethical codes that permit subterfuge in certain circumstances are based upon 'old unethical views that treat research subjects as ignorant objects'[36]. On the contrary it could equally be argued that observing the way children interact, share ideas and construct knowledge within virtual arenas with minimal intrusion on the part of the researcher, is affording the participants and their virtual arena a higher degree of trust and respect. Moreover, is it not important that if we are to understand the educational potential afforded by online environments that we establish as accurate a picture as possible of the ways in which people interact within these spaces? As illustrated hitherto the use of the Internet as a means of communication continues to gather apace and diversify. Against this backdrop Alderson and Morrow advise that: "Ethical standards for internet research are not well developed yet, and eliciting informed consent, negotiating access agreements, assessing the boundaries between the public and the private, and ensuring the security of data transmissions all raise problems."[37]

Steven *et alii*[38] also confer that the development of the ethical debate with regards to Internet based research is as yet undeveloped. I would adhere to the general cautionary tone of Alderson and Morrow's advice. However, I also feel that it is not until we begin to engage with these issues within the messy context of the virtual field of practice that we will begin to develop a greater understanding of the ethical issues and all of their subtleties. What is needed for us to get on with the job of bridging the divide between wider communities' informal adoption of new web-based technologies and the educational establishments' effective use of these, is not rigid 'ethical standards for internet research' but a more dynamic ethical relativism, which is reflexive to the issues thrown up by the fast developing world of web-based communications technologies. I would go as far as to claim that as educators and researchers we have a moral obligation to meet these ethical challenges.

[36] P. Alderson and V. Morrow, *Ethics, Social Research and Consulting with Children and Young People,* Essex: Barnardo's, 2004, p. 109.

[37] *Ibidem*, p. 54.

[38] Steven R. Thomsen, Joseph D. Straubhaar and Drew M. Bolyard (1998), *Ethnomethodology and the Study of Online Communities: Exploring the Cyber Streets,* available from http://www.sosig.ac.uk/iriss/papers/paper32.htm (accessed February 2006).