Ethics of Internet-based Research on Japanese Subcultures

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The Internet may still be counted among the "new" communication technologies. By today, however, many people's everyday experiences are almost inconceivable without it. The number of users worldwide has quadrupled over the past decade and 70% of the population in the "first world" uses the Internet habitually, with an annual growth of 2-3%. The first generation of digital natives .born after the Internet's creation and not knowing a world without it .has already reached adulthood. Broadband connections and mobile devices, such as smartphones, are ubiquitous and thus do their part in conflating the "virtual" and the "real" into one augmented reality. Especially, "social networks" and corresponding services like facebook and mixi.jp, Internet forums, or the mini-blogging platform Twitter increasingly outpace "traditional" Internet service such as e-mail or search engines.

The Internet and its use have attracted the attention of the social sciences, media and cultural studies, resulting in ever-growing (digital) libraries of case studies as well as large-scale surveys. At the same time, the Internet opens up many possibilities to be used as a tool for research, whether for the collaboration between scholars or data collection itself. Collecting personal or private data from the Internet for the purpose of social scientific research, however, is not unproblematic. My paper focuses therefore on the technical and ethical (im-) possibilities of Internet-based research, with a focus on issues pertaining to research on Japanese subcultures.

It has never been easier to quickly access "subcultural" groups such as fujoshi (female fans of male homoeroticism) or cosplayers and their "Western" counterparts respectively. When logged into mixi.jp, you are only a few clicks away from finding willing subjects for interviews who you do not even have to meet in person because of (video) chat technologies. It is furthermore possible to download whole threads of forum discussions on your own computer and immediately begin with coding and analysis. A stay in Japan too does not appear necessary any longer, even for social or ethnographic research. The pseudonymity of the Internet additionally allows the researcher to "disguise" him- or herself as one of those examined, to camouflage national origins or gender if he or she sees the necessity.

My presentation covers a number of technological obstacles to such procedures (e.g., identification verification, language limitations, sites hidden from search engines) as well as methodological concerns (e.g., systematic errors in the sample, social desirability) but its focus lies on the ethical aspects of Internet-based research. Does the pursuit of scientific knowledge justify the

means? What problems exist in comparison to the ethics of ethnographic methods in general? The Internet offers public spaces. is all data therein thus free for the taking? Being a foreign researcher in another country, in this case Japan, increases the possibility of provoking certain responses among respondents (cf. nihonjin-ron). It makes therefore sense to disguise one's national identity by a pseudonym, does it not? I will discuss these questions, using examples and results from my ongoing PhD research project on Internet-facilitated transcultural communication and community building processes.