

# Internet research tools and methods - a continuous challenge in the activity of the ethics and deontology commissions (Instrumente și metode de cercetare pe internet - o provocare continuă în activitatea comisiilor de etică și deontologie)

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**Abstract:** *The proper functioning of a society is based on the existence of moral and ethical norms to guide social behavior. For this reason, different branches of ethics developed to study the human behavior, the questions we need to ask when making decisions and the meaning of ethical values and their role in justifying a decision and guiding our professional activity.*

*Just as research is vital to the development of society and the understanding of social trends, everyday problems and needs, it seems that research must exist only in the frames of ethics so as to provide objective knowledge and not to harm. However, our rapprochement to the internet in the last 20 years raised new challenges for research ethics, such as: demonstrating the veracity of information without compromising the participants' identities, defining a community in the online space, etc.*

*In the light of these events, our study focuses on the value of ethical behavior in research, examines the contemporary ethical challenges in research, and proposes solutions to address them. For this, we analyze researchers' behavior online, and its implications in treating the research subjects, defining and choosing the ethical methods to approach them, and the capacity to guarantee the destruction of data. We end this study with a proposal for an ethical model of decision-making in research based on a deontological approach.*

**Keywords:** *research ethics, ethics principles, ethical theory, natural ethics, inductive ethics*

**Rezumat:** *Buna funcționare a unei societăți se bazează pe existența unor norme morale și etice care să ghideze comportamentul social. Din acest motiv, s-au dezvoltat diferite ramuri ale eticii pentru a studia comportamentul uman, întrebările pe care trebuie să le punem atunci*

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*când luăm decizii și semnificația valorilor etice și rolul acestora în justificarea unei decizii și în ghidarea activității noastre profesionale.*

*Așa cum cercetarea este vitală pentru dezvoltarea societății și înțelegerea tendințelor sociale, a problemelor și nevoilor cotidiene, se pare că cercetarea trebuie să existe doar în cadrele eticii astfel încât să ofere cunoștințe obiective și să nu dăuneze. Cu toate acestea, apropierea noastră de internet în ultimii 20 de ani a ridicat noi provocări pentru etica cercetării, precum: demonstrarea veridicității informațiilor fără a compromite identitățile participanților, definirea unei comunități în spațiul online etc.*

*În lumina acestor evenimente, studiul se concentrează pe valoarea comportamentului etic în cercetare, examinează provocările etice contemporane în cercetare și propune soluții pentru a le aborda. Pentru aceasta, analizăm comportamentul cercetătorilor online, și implicațiile acestuia în tratarea subiecților de cercetare, definirea și alegerea metodelor etice de abordare a acestora, precum și capacitatea de a garanta distrugerea datelor. Încheiem acest studiu cu o propunere pentru un model etic de luare a deciziilor în cercetare bazat pe o abordare deontologică.*

**Cuvinte cheie:** *etica cercetării, principii etice, teorie etică, etica naturală, etica inductivă*

## 1. Introduction

The human being, as Hobbes argued, can live in the natural environment guided by the laws of nature, but this lifestyle does not encourage development; it always places the human in the middle of a natural system in which he must fight for survival. To overcome the boundaries of this lifestyle, people formed the society, where security is guaranteed in exchange for some liberties. Yet, society is a form of organization that is constantly evolving. Thus, the rules and laws that guarantee security and a good life are constantly reformulated to meet new social challenges. But this continuous change makes it impossible for the society to have permanent written laws and rules capable to manage any situation where people may find themselves. As a result, the society founded the ethics- a branch of philosophy that discusses the morality of actions. Although starting from general principles of morality, ethics never succeeded to propose universal rules. Thus, there is no single approach to the principles and ideas underlying the rules of ethics, meaning we do not have a universal set of rules to frame our behavior. Depending on culture and traditions, we developed different theoretical approaches to ethics that lay the foundations of different sets of rules and laws to guide our actions.

In this context one question arises, namely how research must be conducted so as to comply with the research ethics when science is not something that belongs to a country, is not intended only for some people, and which certainly must meet some

general standards in order to be universal. Even more, how can we develop an ethical research on the internet research where we do not have people but profiles, blogs and pages? How do we prove an identity, and ensure data security and destruction online?

## **2. Human mind and ethics**

When we talk about ethics in a new research environment, such as the Internet, we need to understand how the human mind works when changing the environment in which we created daily routines, and how this can affect our ethical behavior.

At first, it is necessary to highlight that all our knowledge is a result of our interaction with the environment, meaning everything we know and our behavioral habits were built starting with the experiences we had in contact with the variety of impulses we received (visual, auditory, tactile and olfactory impulses). Thus, in real life when we engage in a conversation, our behavior is influenced by everything we see, hear, smell and touch. And in the light of these things, our actions are nothing more than a response to all the impulses we interact with. Consequently, our actions are responses to the common impulses, but also to rare impulses. The latest we process by associating the new experience with the ones and we try to project a relatively common response.

Our habit of responding and acting in real life is a routine we built in time; throughout life we learn how to respond and adapt to the complexity of all the information we collect. This adaptation is about prioritizing the most important information, such as safety, emotions, trust, etc. and projecting an appropriate response (a natural response depending on the impulse with the greatest impact). However, the emergence of internet changed the environment in which people socialize, observe, interact, and work etc. By consequence, a lot of impulses of great importance in designing a decision disappeared. On the internet we are deprived of information that in face-to-face interaction would have probably made us respond differently, especially when we talk about the non-verbal language, which constitutes valuable information that influences our natural behavior and works at a different level in decision making.

People were relatively recent introduced to the internet as a new environment of communication, interaction and existence and did not have enough time to form new behavioral habits and new decisional filters. If to this we add the lack in the online interaction of many factors which usually influence our decisions in the real world, then we understand the source of unethical behavior in the online environment, including among researchers.

In the real-world interpersonal relationships and rules of behavior come naturally because we consider aspects such as age, status, height, voice, etc. before

projecting a behavior. But online, where the non-verbal language is absent, our behavior towards people is similar to the one we have towards goods; we tend to treat people superficially, because we do not feel the online interaction as being real. This reaction is normal, considering that most of our online interactions are in writing where we are unable to accurately interpret feelings. But an unethical behavior online is perfectly capable of initiating social conflicts and psychological problems in the real world. Thus, what do we do?

To adopt an ethical behavior online is not impossible, but it takes a lot of energy to make conscious actions and impose a behavior which does not come naturally in activities we do quite often. One way to correct the human behavior online would be through empathy, but this raises the question of what would be the information based on which we empathize? So, to understand the origin of ethics errors in online activity we will focus on two concepts: the natural ethics and the induced ethics.

### 3. Natural ethics

The norms we have, derived from the natural behavior of man, they sprang from our natural instincts improved through consciously imposed restrictions. All these things were a solution towards coexistence in society and for a good life. The good life is what preoccupies us for a long time, which is why many philosophers focused on finding solutions to achieve this goal. Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Aquinas, Grotius, Locke, Rousseau and others (Bix, 2004) believed that morality is a solution for a better life. They founded the natural law theory and thought that the human being is by nature rational and this involves having a moral and ethical behavior (Kichener, 2013). Similarly, Thomas Aquinas stated that the human being received from God the gift of reason and the ability to distinguish between good and bad (Murphy, 2019). This is how people inherited rules of natural ethics. Likewise, Locke saw natural ethics as something that derives from man's natural morality, a gift of nature that provides us with moral duty (Sheridan, 2020).

Yet, it seems that this natural ethical behavior of man described by Locke, Aquinas and many others dissipates in the online environment where the human being is no longer in his natural environment but in a virtual one where the subjects that interact differ and the way socialization takes place differs. If in the real life conversations people pay more attention in selecting words so as not to upset someone, to avoid a confrontation, to show empathy, etc., which is thought to be a natural behavior. Online, because there is a distance between the interacting people, we will notice the absence of the emotional aspects, security, etc. Thus, natural ethics is about an ethical behavior we adopt naturally by analyzing at the subconscious level different information we receive.

#### 4. Inductive ethics

In new environments, where people are not accustomed, there will be a tendency to behave free of rules and constraints, especially if this environment differs from the one we live in. This is the case of Internet where part of human action takes place; it is a new space where we socialize most of the time, where services are provided, transactions are made, and where we work. Basically, internet became a new dimension, in which people transposed part of their lives, the reason why research found there an opportunity for understanding the human conduct and needs, but also for applying the internet research tools (Buchanan & Zimmer, 2021).

The problem of an ethical behavior online is about our activity being performed on the internet, where the real-life rules of behavior do not apply because the identities are different and because we lack appropriate tools, laws and institutions to manage, follow and punish the behavioral deviation from laws or ethics rules. Yet, this virtual world has a tremendous impact on the physical and mental state of people.

The ethical challenges posed by our transition to online life, work and research are about founding new rules of ethics or modifying the existing ones, the application of which will be followed by the ethics commissions in both professional and research activity. But, for grounding them we need specific tools. This challenge could be answered with the help of inductive ethics, which is about the ethics we learn (Taft & White, 2007) by incorporating new rules in the logic of our behavior.

For generating an ethical behavior online it is necessary to train at the individual and group level a behavior that follows the general principles of ethics. For this, Taft and White proposed to model pedagogy for “grounding students in their own individual ethical principles” (Taft & White, 2007, p. 614), especially when ethics is learned throughout life experiences and some may not have it (Kichener, 2013) as shown in the 2008 study by Alegria, Amparo and Conceicao. Thus, we need inductive ethics for an ethical behavior, especially in online, but what approach can we adopt for internet research where nothing is national and there are no universal ethical rules?

#### 5. Theoretical approaches in ethics

Research focuses on ethics only at the end of the 20th century. Yet, ethics was not a novelty to research and was incorporated into the logic of research methodology of various social theories. Still, in the absence of clear ethics rules research could be easily interpreted and exceed the ethical limits, especially when the studies are organized in controlled environments (Gavrilov, 2020; Park, Konge & Artino, 2020).

The first theory to address ethics in human behavior is the theory of natural law, which argued that human behavior is guided in the first place by a natural order

that brings in front of us ethical and moral norms and obligations. In the light of this theory the human reason is the key towards a moral and ethical society; it influences our personality and imposes general principles of action. Starting from here, the contractarianist theory argued that the existence of ethics is due to human agreement which made it possible to establish moral standards, rights and principles of justice. In the meantime, the virtue theorists claim that ethics is not universal and available to everybody; it belongs to good people that grounded moral life principles from life experience and from their families (Kichener, 2013). But also, our morality is not only about people and applies to everything around us. Agreeing with this, the feminist and communitarian theories went further arguing that ethics depends on the whole network of people with whom we communicate (Buchanan & Ess, 2008).

Different from these approaches, two theories that captured our attention emerged, namely utilitarianism and deontology. Utilitarianism is known for supporting actions whose result is positive for the majority. It brings the principle of the cost- benefit balance in the decision-making, and conquered the Anglo-American people (Kichener, 2013; Buchanan & Ess, 2008) but not the Europe. In Europe this theory raises the question of how can we accurately assess the amount of good resulting from a decision before making it, and how can we take decisions without being subjective for completing our tasks? Thus, the Europeans believe that the utilitarian approach is useful only in time of crises, but for daily life the Europeans laid down the basics of deontology, which states that our actions must respect people as individuals. Unlike utilitarianism, it encourages to abandon any activity that is to harm at least one individual. Deontology puts human rights, human dignity, and moral correctness above all else and sustains a behavior that treats people as ends in themselves and not as tools to achieve goals.

These approaches functioned quite well until the emergence of the internet and the COVID-19 pandemics that moved our activity in the online space where the actors differ, the environment is different and much of the ethical rules did not apply. To face these challenges the researchers agreed to establish a set of fundamental ethical principles to guide research, which derive from moral norms and are about "beneficence, non-maleficence, respect for persons, justice, fidelity" (Kichener, 2013, p. 7). However, when a part of our life remains in this new environment even after the pandemics, it is necessary for the rules of ethics to adapt to the new challenges to guarantee an ethical behavior. Consequently, we have to adapt the rules of ethics to apply in the new environment because we understand the impact of internet on our daily life and because we need reliable and objective research results that cause good and avoid harming (Shrader-Frechette, 1994). In general, research is a systematic activity we do to observe and understand things (Gregory, 2003) and to find new ideas

and solutions to everyday problems. But this is what makes it the key towards understanding the world and ourselves; it changes values and principles based on which we organize and live, solves physical and mental problems, and establishes boundaries in human interaction, etc. Thus it has a huge impact on humanity and it is vital for it to be conducted ethically for objective and reliable knowledge.

## **6. New challenges in research ethics and deontology**

One of the biggest challenges of ethics is to adapt to the internet as a totally new environment where even the actors have to be defined from scratch and where the environment differs so much from the real world that almost no rule of behavior is applicable. Thus, how do we define a blog? Is it a person or a public space? Also, how should we behave to be ethically correct when conducting internet research? How can we guarantee the validity of data when the researcher often does not get to know his research subjects and confirm their identity? And, how do we deal with ethical subjects like privacy, people recruitment, the informed consent, data security and confidentiality when using online tools for data collection and storage, and how can we differentiate the private space from the public one?

## **7. Privacy**

The first challenge that both ethics commissions and researchers face when analyzing the appropriateness of the research methods is the privacy of the research subjects. How do we treat privacy in an environment where all information is accessible to everybody? Is that information public or private?

To answer these questions, we must start with the fact that all of us believe that online information which is accessible to everybody is public because this is how it works in real life. But, Seningson-Elm (2009) tells us that privacy on the internet must not be seen as privacy in real life. On the internet privacy is about what people perceive to be their private space, and the definition of privacy depends on the purpose for which the information is collected (Markham, 2012, as cited in Lomborg, 2012).

If we take Facebook for example, in the first instance we might think that the information posted there is public. But, every profile has a list of friends, is part of certain groups and the posts in these places differ; some are personal and others are of public interest, meaning that people clearly differentiate between personal and public space and adapted their real life notions of intimacy to the internet. These aspects must be considered by the researcher together with the fact that an open profile also does not mean public, especially when not all online users search through

the page set-ups to understand the functionality of all the settings. In online, the simple fact that people post something on their page and not in a group should make us understand the nature of information. Thus, we have two types of posts on social media: one contains personal information, shared with friends, and the other contains public information (general beliefs, news and quotes), shared in groups. This suggests that at the virtual level people created a personal space in which they address to their friends, from which if we want to collect information we must ask for consent. And also that there is a public space where people address to their peers, usually a group, where people do not know each other, but share information of common interest.

Consequently, privacy on the Internet is about the imaginary boundaries that people set between private and public life we must identify and respect.

## 8. Confidentiality

Privacy and confidentiality are closely linked, but the latest goes a little further, drawing a behavioral model for the researcher when it comes to people's personal information and his commitment to keep it safe. Confidentiality refers to the information that could lead to the identification of someone's identity, like "education, financial transactions, medical history, criminal or employment records, etc." (Buchanan & Zimmer, 2021).

Internet came as a challenge to data confidentiality and the researchers' capacity to guarantee an ethical behavior especially when using online tools for data collection, storage and processing. The researcher finds himself often in the role of an online user even when conducting research, and this raises the issue of guaranteeing data safety and destruction when we do not know how all the online tools work. A solution would be to choose carefully the research tools, and to formulate questionnaires and interviews in a way that does not allow the creation of a personal profile, at least in the domains where possible. Yet, the challenge of guaranteeing data destruction remains.

## 9. The recruitment of research subjects

Recruiting research subjects is another ethical challenge of the internet research. It all starts with the question: how can the researcher verify the identity of the recruited subjects? Or, how do we define real users? The first step in answering these questions is to identify the types of users.

On social networks we usually have two types of users: the content creators and the online consumers. From the first category we have users who post personal information, recent pictures, share locations, make and receive comments, etc.

But in this category there are also users we suspect of false identity. They usually post news, opinions, frustrations, and are very active but without revealing anything personal. These users often belong to the bullying industry, advertising, defamation, etc. In the second category we have less active people, but with personal pictures, information about their birthplace, their job, a list of friends that went to the same school, have the same job, or were born in the same village, etc. Because research involves ethical responsibility in selecting research subjects, we must perform subjects screening to ensure that the online identity of our subjects matches their real one. In view of these things, on the internet a real person would be someone who through his activity and all the information found on a page, sketches an identity, a life.

## 10. Informed consent

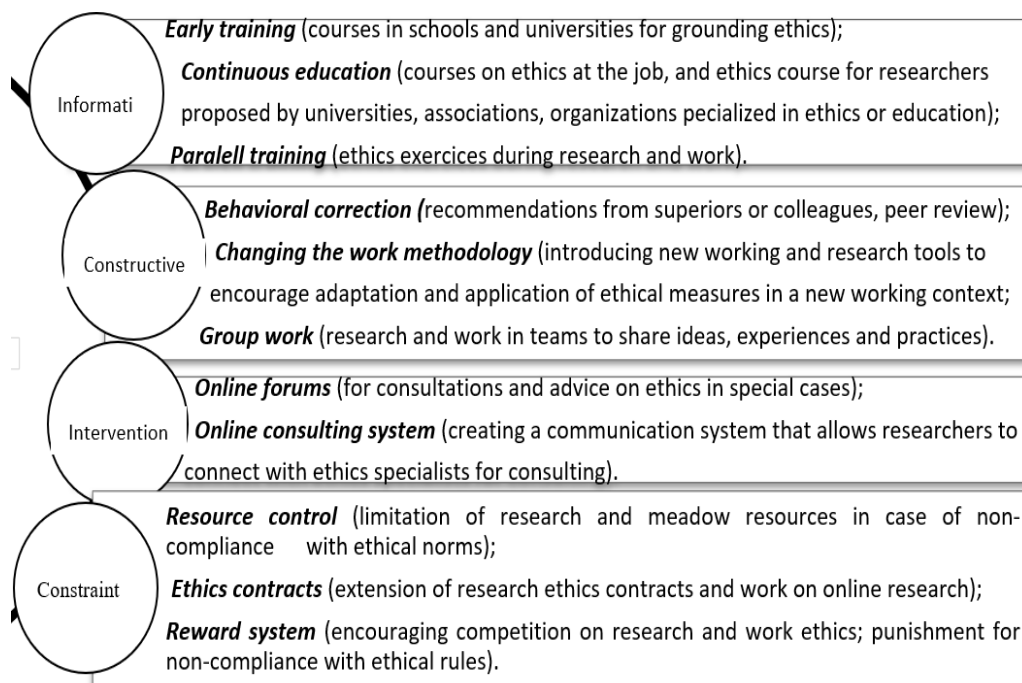
In traditional research, consent is obtained verbally or in writing. However, in internet research things take a different turn. At first, we must consider that in online people don't read much. Privacy and confidentiality information is voluminous, and for this reason many online consumers prefer to read only the part where is stated that personal information is not shared with third parties, to read it at the first use of a site, or not to read it at all (Milne & Culnan, 2004). In the light of these, the researchers must obtain an informed consent from the subjects regarding the personal data processing, but how informed is our research subject? To comply with the informed consent requirements researchers started to use "online signatures, checking a box to consent and encrypted digital signatures" (Buchanan & Zimmer, 2021). But when people do not read the information, the researcher gets more responsibility for synthesizing and explaining the purpose of his research, data privacy and confidentiality. Thus, the researchers may also consider initiating the interviews or questionnaires only after the subjects went through a small quiz to ensure that people understood the way their information will be used and stored.

The informed consent is a problem in the big data studies where researchers believe that the distance between them and their research subjects is big enough to guarantee the subjects security, and consider it to be a good reason for skipping the step of informed consent. Yet, ethics is also about respecting the human rights, human dignity and doing good. Thus, for an ethical behavior asking the informed consent is obligatory, especially if a big data study can change policies, or if the study collects personal data.

## 11. Solutions for ethical online research and a model of ethical decision-making

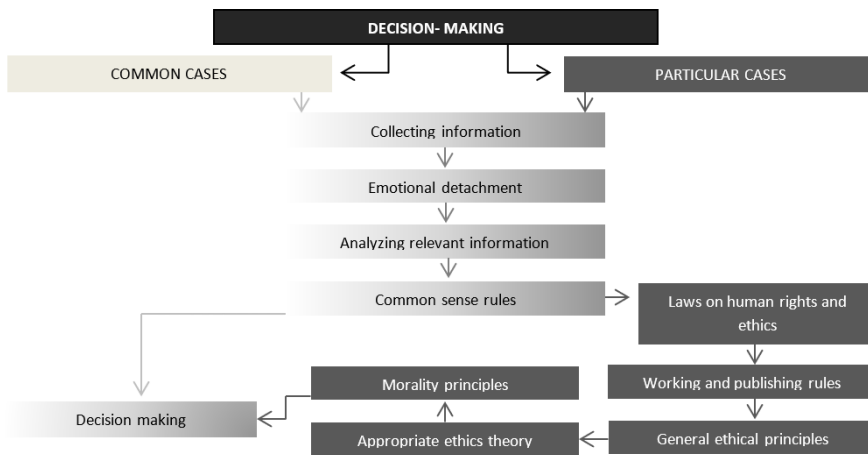
Considering the ethics challenges raised by internet research after the COVID-19 Pandemics moved much of our activity in the online space, ethics gets into a critical

need for changes that could shape an ethical behavior in research but also in professional activity in online. The studies on internet research ethics proposed several solutions, like the Internet Research Association suggested to develop ethical guidelines in online research regardless of culture and traditions (Buchanan & Ess, 2008). Another solution is to apply universal models of decision-making such as the 5-level model proposed by Kichener in 2013. Still, when we propose solutions to the internet research ethics challenges, we understand that the solutions may lie in inductive ethics and in the way in which people were taught to adapt to new challenges. Starting from this, we propose several solutions for solving the ethical challenges posed by the internet research (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Solutions for ethical research and work online  
Source: Author's figure

Many of the solutions proposed in figure 1 require special resources. Consequently, we propose a model of decision-making meant to help the decisional process for an ethical behavior in the online research and professional activity until the formulation and application of new rules (see figure 2).



**Figure 2:** A theoretical model for ethical decision-making online  
Source: Author's figure

In everyday life we face common situations when we have to apply ethical norms, but there are also rare situations when we cannot decide so easily. For the common cases we have the common sense that helps us take a decision. But, in rare situations, where our common sense is not enough we need another model of rationalization for decision making. In this case, a good decision is about following the impact of our decision on the human rights, its compliance with the employment contracts and codes of conduct, with the general principles of ethics etc. All these filters are meant to help us make the best ethical choices in the absence of clear ethical rules.

## 12. Conclusions

In this research we outlined some of the biggest ethical challenges faced by the ethics and deontology commissions as well as by the researchers in the era of technology. Between these challenges we highlight: identifying a real person on social media, people privacy, data confidentiality, recruiting research subjects, and the difficulty of applying the real life ethical rules in online when we lack impulses that helped us to adopt a natural ethical behavior.

The best solution for a situation that became the new normal is to use inductive ethics, but it requires time and effort to show efficient results. With this in mind we proposed a temporary solution for making ethical decisions in online research and activity, where the common sense and the existing ethical rules do not apply.

And last but not least, we highlight the need of a clear legislative framework that would establish limits in online research and professional activity so that ethics and deontology commissions, but also the entire society, can easily relate to stable

rules to evaluate decisions in research and in professional activity. The legislative framework will define the online actors and will ease the researchers work when deciding how to approach the online subjects and be ethically correct.

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