Conducting Online Research Information Pack

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Claire Hewson,
Senior Lecturer in Psychology,
Human Research Ethics Committee Chair,
The Open University
claire.hewson@open.ac.uk

The Open University

PURPOSE

This document collates some guidance on gathering research data remotely using online methods (*Internet-mediated Research*, *IMR*).

- Software tools, existing guidelines/resources and principles of good practice are noted
- Caveats are highlighted, particularly relating to ethics considerations when collecting data online

POSSIBILITIES OF GATHERING RESEARCH DATA ONLINE

- **Obtrusive methods**
  Surveys/questionnaires; experiments; interviews; focus groups; observation
- **Unobtrusive methods**
  Data harvesting; web crawling; ‘big data’ approaches; use of documents and secondary data; observation

PRACTICALITIES OF IMR

A key feature of IMR is that it involves acquisition of data from or about individuals in the absence of face-to-face co-presence

- **COUPLED WITH** greater scope for carrying out quite complex interactive procedures, from a diverse range of networked individuals.

This can lead to issues of **RELIABILITY, VALIDITY** and **ETHICS** due to reduced levels of researcher control over, and knowledge of, participants, participant behaviours and study procedures.

Enhanced risks in managing data securely also lead to issues related to research **ETHICS**.

VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY IN IMR

- There is now a large body of evidence that IMR methods can generate valid, reliable, trustworthy data.
- There now exist numerous tools and procedures that have been shown to work well in IMR, leading to high quality research data.
- There is now broad acceptance of the value of a diverse range of IMR methods, including surveys, experiments, interviews, focus groups, observation, and ethnographic approaches.
- IMR methods are now an established viable alternative to offline face to face methods.

ETHICS IN IMR

Several guides now exist that outline appropriate ethics practices and principles for IMR.

The following are indicative (see also the additional guidance offered later in this document),

- Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) guidance (latest version 3.0: https://aoir.org/reports/ethics3.pdf).
- British Psychological Society (BPS) guidance (latest version 2017: available at https://www.bps.org.uk/).
- Hewson, C. (2016). 'Ethics issues in digital methods research'. Chapter in Roberts et al (2016) Digital methods for social science. Palgrave Macmillan.

IMR GUIDELINES AND RESOURCES

Indicative texts

- Callegaro, Manfreda & Vehovar (2016). Web Survey Methodology. Sage. *This textbook offers practical guidance on implementing web surveys.*
- Fielding, Lee & Blank (Eds.) (2017). The Sage Handbook of Online Research Methods (2nd Ed.). Sage. *Comprehensive collection, written by experts in the field, covering practicalities, theoretical considerations, and current issues and debates.*
- Hewson, Vogel & Laurent (2016). Internet Research Methods (2nd Ed.). Sage*. Practical handbook guide, covering a broad range of methods, offering clear practical guidance and tips, as well as commentary on the key theoretical issues and debates to consider in this area.*
- Roberts, Snee, Hine, Morey & Watson (Eds.) (2016). Digital Methods for Social Science: An Interdisciplinary Guide to Research Innovation. Palgrave. *Edited collection of case study examples and key topics to consider, written from a social science perspective.*

IMR DESIGN GUIDELINES AND RESOURCES

CONDUCTING RESEARCH ON THE INTERNET – A NEW ERA

https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-27/december-2014/methods-conducting-research-internet-new-era

A concise, to-the-point introductory guide that outlines possibilities, resources and good practice guidelines.

Methods: Conducting research on the internet – a new era

Claire Hewson provides updates on practicalities and possibilities

SHARE
December 2014
Vol.27 (pp.946-951)

Related articles

> The connected brain
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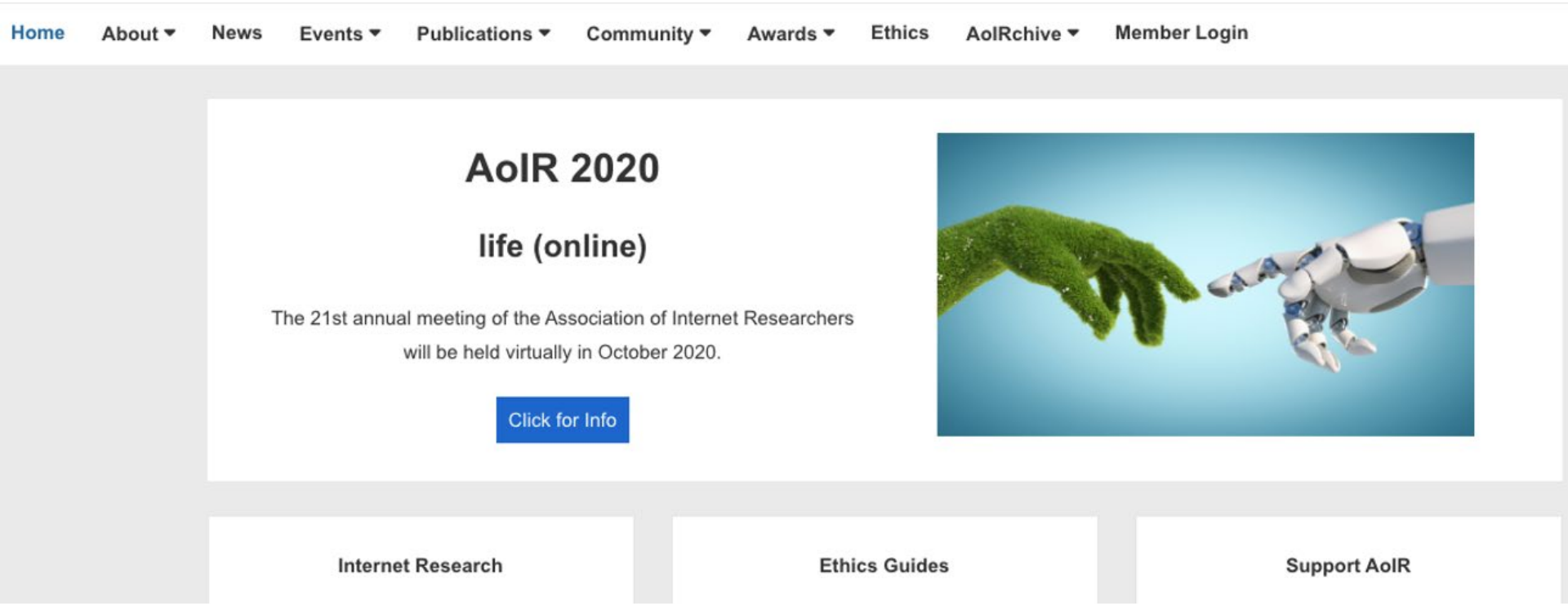
IMR DESIGN GUIDELINES AND RESOURCES

AoIR: http://aori.org/

The Association of Internet Researchers, an academic community engaged with online data collection methods, who promote 'critical and scholarly Internet research independent from traditional disciplines and existing across academic borders'.

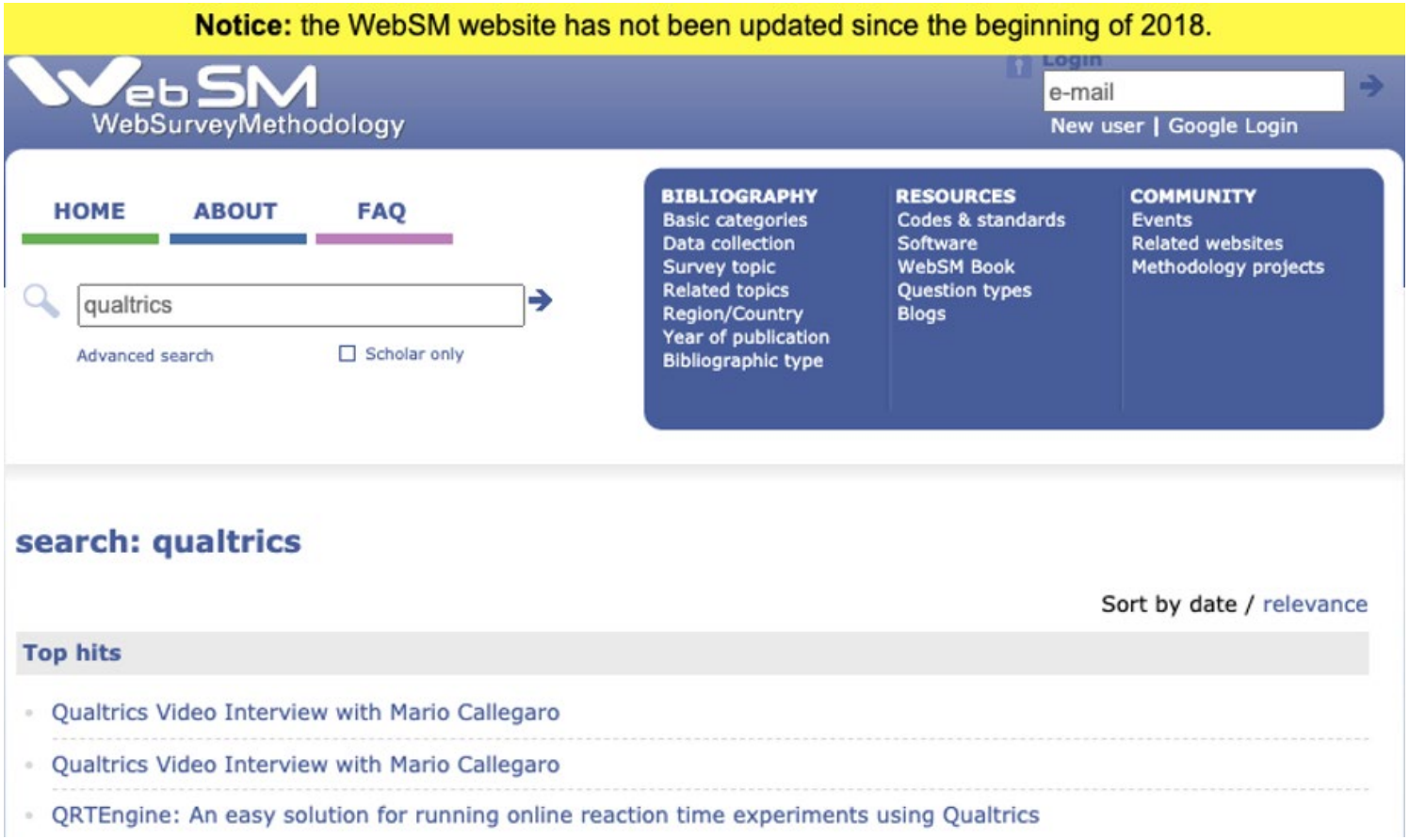
AoIR promotes high ethical and professional standards in Internet research.



IMR DESIGN GUIDELINES AND RESOURCES

WebSM, WebSurveyMethodology: http://www.websm

A wealth of information – including searchable database of software solutions – on online survey research, including academic papers, links, resources, guidelines, and so on. (Not updated since 2018 but still a valuable, comprehensive source of information on this method).



SELECTED SOFTWARE RESOURCES/TOOLS

The software packages and tools mentioned here are indicative and intended to offer examples of potentially useful packages and services that may be suitable for researchers wanting to gather research data online.

Disclaimer:

The nature of these tools and services, including their (often evolving) functionalities and current ‘terms and conditions’, should be checked carefully to assess their suitability for the intended purpose prior to adoption.

Compliance of these tools with current OU (and wider national/international) policies and guidelines, including research ethics and data protection, must be fully considered, consulting with the relevant units (e.g. Human Research Ethics Committee; Data Protection, Information Security) where necessary.

SELECTED SOFTWARE RESOURCES/TOOLS

ONLINE SURVEYS

Qualtrics: qualtrics.com. *University subscriptions available (e.g. FASS-wide). Suitable for online surveys and simple experiments. GDPR-compliant. Respondent panel options at additional cost. Sophisticated functionality options (e.g. skip logic, randomisation, graphics).*

JISC Online surveys: onlinesurveys.ac.uk. *UK-based online survey tool designed for academic research, education and public sector organisations. GDPR-compliant.*

Microsoft forms. *Available with Office 365. GDPR-compliant. Supports simple surveys*.

SELECTED SOFTWARE RESOURCES/TOOLS

INTERVIEWS/FOCUS GROUPS

OU-approved collaboration tools (for additional information see the Information Security official guide):

- Skype for Business (Microsoft Office suite)
- Microsoft Teams (Office 365)

If the OU-approved collaboration tools cannot be utilised, please only use the tools referenced below once you have completed the following actions:

1. Logged out of any OU systems and the OU network – including Office 365 (SharePoint, Outlook, Teams etc…)
2. Ensured that any OU information or sensitive data is not discussed on the call

- Zoom
- Facebook Messenger
- WhatsApp (messaging / VoIP service owned by Facebook)

Other approaches:

- Email may also be an option for asynchronous communications.

ONLINE EXPERIMENTS

- Qualtrics (simple experiments)
- WEXTOR: https://wextor.eu/wextor/en/

SELECTED SOFTWARE RESOURCES/TOOLS

SOCIAL MEDIA ANALYSIS/DATA HARVESTING

- LogAnalyzer: www.sclog.eu. *Tool to analyse server log files.*
- Google Analytics: www.google.co.uk/analytics. *Google's analytics service that tracks and reports website traffic.*
- Mozdeh: http://mozdeh.wlv.ac.uk/. *A free Windows program for keyword, issue, time, sentiment, gender and content analysis of (mainly) social media texts (Statistical Cybermetrics Research Group, University of Wolverhampton).*
- NCapture (web browser extension, part of NVivo package). *Web browser extension to allow web content to be captured and imported into NVivo.*

ETHICS IN ONLINE RESEARCH

Some ethics issues require special consideration in an IMR context, the complexities of which are not always obvious to researchers or participants.

These issues require extra care, and consultation of relevant ethics guidelines, to ensure minimising potential risks. They include:

- Data security
- Data traceability
- Anonymity/confidentiality
- Re-identifiability/de-anonymisation
- Blurred public/private distinctions online
- Ensuring robust consent, withdrawal and debrief procedures comparable to offline methods

ETHICS IN ONLINE RESEARCH

DATA SECURITY AND TRACEABILITY

Researchers should carefully consider where and how any research data will be collected and stored online. Considerations to pay particular attention to include:

- Use of third party services/servers – are these within or outside the UK/EU?
- Are adequate encryption and/or password protection methods in place?
- Levels of risk of tracing published data back to original sources/context, e.g. verbatim quotes from online discussion groups.

ANONYMITY AND RE-IDENTIFIABILITY

Considerations to pay particular attention to include:

- Are any data being collected that could potentially lead to identification of persons, e.g. IP addresses?
- Could non-personally identifiable data potentially become identifiable if combined with other data sources (particularly any sources that are available and accessible in the public domain)?
- Could data that have been anonymised potentially become re-identifiable, e.g. by combining with other available data sources?
- Algorithms can potentially be used to analyse data/information in order to uncover/infer characteristics and traits of individuals that are ‘baked into the data’. Are there any associated risks here, e.g. in dissemination plans?

PUBLIC/PRIVATE DOMAIN DISTINCTIONS ONLINE

What is reasonably considered public and private online continues to be debated, especially in relation to research applications and user expectations. Considerations to pay particular attention to include:

- Recognising and assessing the blurred boundary between public and private spaces online, and how this relates to individual research contexts.
- Considering people's expectations, understandings and wishes about how their online data traces may be used, and when gaining consent would be appropriate.
- Issues of copyright and ownership of online date, and permissions required for research usage.
- If it is decided that consent is not required/appropriate/practicable, ensuring rigorous safeguards are in place to protect personal identities.

ETHICS IN ONLINE RESEARCH

CONSENT, WITHDRAWAL AND DEBRIEF PROCEDURES ONLINE

Ensuring rigorous, effective and reliable procedures are in place, comparable with those commonly used offline, can present difficulties in online research. Considerations to pay particular attention to include:

- Implementing procedures to protect vulnerable groups and/or those not able to give proper informed consent
- How to ensure participants engage properly with study information sheets and informed consent processes
- How to effectively track and monitor participants, and be able to detect and address any upset/distress/harm caused where these risks may be higher

FINAL COMMENTS/ADVICE ON ETHICS IN ONLINE RESEARCH

- Some risks are enhanced when collecting data using online methods; researchers should carefully consider and implement safeguards to minimise risks.
- Navigating the public-private domain distinction is not as clear cut as freely using any data traces that are readily accessible without gatekeeper permission; researchers should consider people's expectations and any associated potential harms before using traces without consent.
- Using data traces without consent requires a clear justification, and additional safeguards to be carefully considered and put in place.
- Research involving sensitive/personal topics and data needs extra careful safeguards in place to minimise the enhanced risks involved: this is the **principle of proportionality**.