“You Can’t Do That!” The Ethics and Pragmatics of Ethnographic Approaches To New Media Research

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Indiana University Bloomington, Herman B. Wells Library, Room LI001

Talk preceded by an informal gathering with cookies, tea, and coffee, available at 1:45pm.  
A reception for the speaker and graduate students will follow the talk.

ABSTRACT

From the beginning of my research on new media use among queer and questioning rural youth, my Institutional Review Board’s (IRB) investments in the appearance of distance, objectivity, and propriety were palpable. Each review of my IRB proposal came back with recommended tweaks to my research design that revealed little knowledge or experience dealing with material realities that define many rural communities. Requested revisions also spoke to the then (arguably current) uncertainty of how to conceptualize and regulate the Internet as a “field site.” This discussion offers a detailed review of how my project’s methodological approach uses information communication technologies (ICTs) as both tools and sites of ethnographic research. I show how the approach I took connects to and departs from the broader literature on studies of rurality, identity, and research of queer youth sexualities and genders. I move from the particularities of my investigation as it developed in the field to a brief overview of some of the dilemmas ethnographic studies of new media and sexuality face in defining a clear object of study. Earlier studies are examined to show how the implications of framing the unit of analysis as “new” and “sexual” played out in the research design of my investigations. The third and final part of this presentation explores what I call the “plasticity of vulnerability”: the construction of youth (among a growing list of subjects) as vulnerable. This construction of youth-as-vulnerable is mapped through an analysis of the IRB approval process for this project. I unravel any presumptions of moral clarity and ethically driven structure to the research protocols built into this study. Instead, I scrutinize the politics and assumptions that led to the ad-hoc tailoring of ethical stipulations, by me and through campus IRB mandate. The IRB’s imagining of rural places and queer youth as calling for “special accommodations” played a significant role in the decisions of who to include in this study and how to go about gathering their stories. The IRB process for this research casts an argument for deeper reflection on the critical role negotiations of methods, ethics, and politics play in constructing scientific knowledge about queer and questioning youth.
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Mary Gray is Assistant Professor of Communication and Culture and an affiliate faculty member of the Gender Studies Department and American Studies Program at Indiana University Bloomington. She uses her interdisciplinary background in anthropology and critical media studies to examine the production, representation, and performance of modern sexuality and gender with an ethnographic focus on youth living in the rural United States. She is the author of *In Your Face: Stories from the Lives of Queer Youth*. Her current book project, *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and the Crafting of Queer Identities*, explores how rural young people fashion queer senses of identity through media engagement and how performances of mass-mediated queer identities rework the rural public sphere. Her areas of research include: the social theory and ethnography of queer sexualities and genders; intersections of new media, social movements, and cultural identity; sociology of youth and public culture; qualitative methodologies, particularly ethnography of media and non-urban settings; and the relationship between research ethics and the construction of scientific knowledge and practice. Her next project will explore the negotiation of personhood in popular and scientific discourse through an ethnographic study of Institutional Review Boards, discipline-specific ethics codes, and the construction of “vulnerable” and “at-risk” populations in social scientific research. For more information, see Dr. Gray’s web site at [http://www.indiana.edu/~qcentral](http://www.indiana.edu/~qcentral).