

Internet Research

Research on the Internet presents new concerns to the prevalent human participants issues: risk, consent, participation by minors, and confidentiality. **Investigators using the Internet must provide information on how they address these issues.**

Risk: some sensitive research may not be appropriate for the Internet. Breach of confidentiality is the primary source of harm in most Internet research and is discussed below.

Consent: The IRB can waive the requirement for signed consent when appropriate. Innocuous research on non-sensitive topics conducted over the Internet may not need documentation of consent (NOTE: only the IRB can make that decision). As it is currently not possible to get a signed consent form over the Internet, where signature is required, investigators can have participants submit assigned consent form and send them a password to gain access to the research pages.

Alternatively, investigators can announce the study, provide the consent form, and have the participants download the consent and then mail it to the investigator. At that time, the investigator could give the participant the password to access the study. In any case, investigators must indicate to the IRB how they plan to obtain consent from participants.

Participation by minors: The IRB has the authority to waive the requirement for parental permission and where the research qualifies for such a waiver, no additional safeguards for minors are required. Where parental permission is required, investigators can use passwords as above. Because no system can guarantee that minors are not participating, some research may not be appropriate for the Internet.

Confidentiality: Because it is impossible to guarantee absolute data security over the Internet, some extremely sensitive research may not be appropriate for the Internet. Investigators need to address how they intend to assure confidentiality, keeping in mind that the degree of concern over confidentiality is directly related to the sensitivity of the data. Data transmitted via e-mail cannot be anonymous without the use of additional steps. Almost all forms of e-mail contain the sender's e-mail address. In order to maintain anonymity, the research must use an "anonymizer" – a third party site which strips off the sender's e-mail address. Data submitted over the Web can only be anonymous if software is used to store the information directly in a database without identifiers; otherwise identifiers are attached to the data. Web servers automatically store a great deal of personal information about visitors to a web site, and others can access that information. When a research project is conducted over the Internet, the following statement must be placed in the introduction of the study: (The statement must be highlighted.) **“This project has been approved by the Buffalo State Institutional Review Board. Approval of this project only signifies that the procedures adequately protect the rights and welfare of the participants. Please note that absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed due to the limited protections of Internet access.”**

Three types of research-related activities involve the use of the Internet:

1. Recruiting participants over the Internet
2. Observation of Internet activity
3. Collecting data over the Internet

Recruiting Participants over the Internet: The use of the Internet to recruit participants presents similar issues as with any other recruiting tool. The IRB needs to review information to be presented to participants. Not only does the IRB need to review the text of the recruitment script, but it also has to examine the context in which the recruitment takes place (e.g., posting a message on a newsgroup or creating a web site to recruit participants). When the Web is used to recruit participants, the IRB must see an example of what the prospective participants will see (i.e., a screen shot).

Observation of Internet Activity: Observation of Internet activity usually involves such activities as gathering information about the use of the Internet and/or recording user information or users' comments. Examples include: participant observation of an on-line discussion group, using "cookies" to track web sites visited, or asking visitors to a web site to provide demographic information. The human participants issues involved in this type of research generally involve consent/disclosure issues. Investigators need to indicate to the IRB how they intend to obtain the participants' consent to use this information for research. As with other types of participant observation, investigators generally must disclose their role as a researcher to the group participants.

Gathering Data on the Internet: This type of research generally involves having participants submit data (e.g. survey data) over the Internet, and it presents the most serious human participant's concerns due to the potential limits to confidentiality. As in other types of Internet research, the investigator needs to indicate how the participant's consent will be obtained and his/her confidentiality protected. Of particular concern with this type of research is the participation by minors that must be addressed in their IRB protocol.