THE ETHICS OF INTERNET RESEARCH

A RHETORICAL, CASE-BASED PROCESS

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■ Foreword

For at least seven reasons, this volume is essential reading for anyone interested in the multiple complexities of Internet research ethics (IRE), complexities that will only continue to grow and expand as we develop and discover still more ways to make use of the Internet and the web as tools of both communication and research.

One, as the first book-length treatment of IRE *per se* to appear in some five years (an epoch or so in Internet time), this volume extends our ethical foci to encompass domains of interest, such as MMOGs, that have, up until now, been relatively neglected in IRE work. Moreover, McKee and Porter take up entire venues and modalities of communication that have emerged only more recently under the rubric of "Web 2.0"—most notably, blogs and social networking sites. Two, McKee and Porter provide a comprehensive and much-needed overview of the regulatory frameworks and national and international law relevant to Internet research. In both these ways, their book provides Internet researchers and ethicists with crucial new resources.

Three, the book further amasses an extensive range of interviews and fine-grained case-studies that document the range of ethical challenges facing Internet researchers in diverse contexts and settings, along with multiple strategies and practices researchers have brought into play in efforts to resolve these challenges. The volume thus substantively expands the literature of IRE that documents such case-studies and resolutions.

By presenting these, together with its expanded ethical foci and up-to-date overview of relevant regulatory and legal aspects, McKee and Porter have thus constituted what amounts to an essential handbook for Internet

researchers. Such a handbook clearly represents a significant contribution to the field of IRE and its multiple stakeholders—not only researchers, but also the various bodies that have oversight responsibilities for Internet research (e.g., Institutional Review Boards [IRBs] in the United States, Research Ethics Boards [National Research Council, Canada], external Learning and Teaching Support Networks' subject centres and internal Academic Standards and Policy committees in the United Kingdom, the National Health and Medical Research Council [Australia] and the Australian Research Council, and so on), as well, of course, those whose activities and engagements online are being studied in various ways. This volume not only contributes to the substance and content of IRE in these ways, but also helps articulate and define IRE as a field in its own right within applied ethics.

These would be reasons enough to delve carefully and thoughtfully into this work, but it gets even better!

Four, McKee and Porter make a distinctive and, I am convinced, singularly fruitful contribution to both the theoretical and practical dimensions of IRE, as they articulate and powerfully defend an ethical approach that conjoins the singular strengths of both rhetoric and casuistry (in their best senses—senses that are carefully clarified here so as to clear away popular misconceptions of both). McKee and Porter thereby provide us with well-grounded theory: this theory, moreover, is at the same time (as it should and must be) fully informed and illuminated by the extensive range of interviews and case-studies provided here in the requisite fine-grained detail. Moreover, while rhetoric and casuistry enjoy a long and productive history in Western ethics (at least up until the past two centuries or so, as they also clarify), McKee and Porter's application of rhetoric and casuistry to the multiple issues and difficulties of IRE is novel. In doing so, they powerfully extend what I take to be very useful approaches already widely taken up in IRE—namely, Habermasian and feminist communicative ethics, grounded in an Aristotelian emphasis on *phronesis* as just the sort of practical, reflective judgment that we must bring to bear precisely in the sorts of ethical challenges that give ethicists and researchers alike their greatest difficulty, i.e., those cases that escape more straightforward, algorithmic deductions from general principles and norms. McKee and Porter's work does not simply extend these: more significantly and fruitfully, their resurrection of rhetoric and casuistry thereby dramatically expands on the conceptual frameworks and tools at our disposal for analyzing and resolving both familiar and emerging ethical challenges. While much good work has been done and can be done using extant guidelines and frameworks, McKee and Porter's creative and fruitful novelty has given us enhancements and expansions of our ethical toolkits that are desperately needed in

light of the ever-changing, ever-expanding range of ethical challenges facing Internet researchers.

Five, as is demanded by the Internet and the web as rapidly diffusing tools of communication that thereby facilitate more and more *cross-cultural* communication, collaborations, and conflicts, McKee and Porter pay close attention to the ethical complexities introduced by sometimes radical differences between diverse cultural norms, practices, traditions, and ethical frameworks. This cross-cultural sensibility is a distinctively important—in my view, absolutely requisite—strength of their rhetorical-casuistic approach. That is, not only do they spread a global net in seeking out examples and viewpoints from a wide diversity of cultures: moreover, their rhetorical-casuistic approach works in crucial ways to uphold the legitimacy and relevance of local ethical traditions and norms, while at the same time avoiding a kind of particularism that would abandon us to ethical relativism and its multiple dangers.

And it keeps getting better! Six: as McKee and Porter draw deeply from the relevant and essential philosophical and rhetorical wells, they thereby pull off the utterly essential but extraordinarily difficult maneuver of crafting a genuinely interdisciplinary approach to IRE. Those of us who have worked in these fields have recognized more or less from the outset that such interdisciplinarity is indeed essential. But as anyone who has tried it also knows, working fruitfully across disciplines without falling into a range of well-known pitfalls—beginning with sheer superficiality as we move outside the domains of our own expertise—is breathtakingly difficult. McKee and Porter, however, accomplish this most challenging feat. They thereby not only dramatically enhance the theoretical and practical resources available to Internet researchers, but they also provide a working model *in situ* of how we may "do" such interdisciplinary work effectively.

Before turning to the seventh reason, some background will help make clear why this last component is so significant. As McKee and Porter observe, there has been substantial development and growth in the field of IRE in recent years. In this direction, their work can be usefully complemented by reference to Elizabeth Buchanan's recent and, in my view, authoritatively comprehensive overview of IRE (see Buchanan, 2009). Despite that growth, however, IRE has suffered from an especially crippling deficit: precisely because our most difficult ethical challenges are matters that thereby require ethical judgment (*phronesis*) and hence do not easily reduce to algorithmic recipes, extant guidelines and accounts of particular ethical decisions reached by specific researchers have not moved into perhaps the most essential component of a genuinely *useful* ethics— namely, careful and detailed guidance on how to proceed with the difficult business of attempting to discern and *judge* how to apply extant guidelines and norms to the specific challenges faced by a particular researcher in a specific

context. Again, and as McKee and Porter make acutely clear, no algorithms or simple deductive schemas work in these sorts of situations. (Part of the great difficulty is just that the specificity and, in many instances, the novelty of a given ethical challenge requires us first to *judge* which larger norms appear to apply and, in the case of conflict, in what priority. No algorithm or deduction can begin, that is, without first knowing just what general principles and norms we are to bring to bear on our particular situation.)

Given the great difficulties surrounding such matters of judgment, it is no surprise that earlier work in IRE has been relatively silent on *how* to work towards making such judgments. At the same time, of course, it is just here that we need the most help. Most happily—and this is reason seven to read this volume—McKee and Porter accomplish here what others have largely (if understandably) neglected. As intended by their rhetorical-casuistic approach, they draw together from the specific efforts of Internet researchers to respond to specific ethical challenges a series of procedural *practices* that constitute a much-needed "how-to" guide to applying extant guidelines and norms. To my knowledge, this guidance and list of suggestions constitute the best that anyone can offer to researchers—and, by extension, to those regulatory bodies such as review boards—struggling with the distinctive ethical challenges and difficulties evoked within a given research project and its unique contexts. It is guidance and, in Aristotle's sense, prudential wisdom that are urgently needed.

McKee and Porter thus move the theory, practice, and, we may say, available wisdom of IRE—now more clearly defined as its own distinctive field— several crucial steps forward. Those philosophers and rhetoricians interested in interdisciplinary applications of important theories in conjunction with multiple case-studies and the fine-grained details drawn from *praxis* will find this volume to be essential reading. It will further prove to be an indispensible resource for both Internet researchers and, where applicable, those who must evaluate and approve their research (such as U.S. IRBs and their correlatives elsewhere). Perhaps most importantly, as fully informed by both theory and *praxis,* McKee and Porter's volume will serve as an especially *practical* and thereby invaluable handbook and guide for researchers seeking to do the right thing as their work confronts them with difficult and often novel ethical challenges.

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