**When Should We Use Real Names in Published Accounts of Internet Research?**
by Amy Bruckman, Kurt Luther, and Casey Fiesler

"John" is one of the most established members of Newgrounds (http://www.newgrounds.com), an online community of artists, programmers, and musicians with over two million registered members as of October 2011. In February 2004, John organized an event called a "Time Trial Challenge" in which animators collaborated over the Internet to complete short movies in less than three days. The event was a huge success. Over the next twelve months, John led twelve more challenges, each more popular than the last, with the finale attracting nearly half a million views—at a time when YouTube was only a few weeks old. More importantly, John had started a phenomenon—the community animation project, or "collab." Rarely seen before the Time Trial Challenges, collabs were now crowding out all other discussions on the Newgrounds forums, with nearly a hundred new collabs begun in August 2006 alone. In 2007, the community celebrated "John Day" with more than 25 tribute animations created in his honor. By 2010, John had led or participated in nearly fifty collabs watched by tens of millions of viewers. That same year, Newgrounds hired him as a full-time community manager and animator.

John's real name is Luis Castanon. Considering his creative accomplishments, we argue that anonymizing him in our research accounts of his work would be unethical. In studying the Internet today, the popular conception of "human subjects research" is fundamentally outdated. Our basic assumptions need to be rethought for an age where we are studying people who deserve credit for their work, and who are entitled to respond to our representations of them.

In this chapter, we will first briefly review the history of the notion of "human subjects research." Next, we will explore why that paradigm needs to be rethought. This is further complicated by the intriguing relationship between real names and pseudonyms, and by the presence of minors online. Finally, we will provide practical advice for researchers working with research participants—when to ask whether research subjects wish to be credited by name, and when NOT to credit them by name even if they request it.

If our participants are credited by name, it follows that they are likely to find accounts of themselves in print, and have comments on those accounts. We will argue that participants are entitled to respond to our representations of them before publication, and discuss the benefits and costs of this approach.

**The History of Human Subjects Research**

During World War II, researchers in Nazi Germany used humans in horrific experiments that today we would not allow to be performed on animals. The Nuremberg Code (*The Trials of War Criminals before the Nuremburg Military Tribunals under Control Council Law No. 10*, 1949) was drafted in the wake of The Nuremberg War Trials. However, problems still existed in the ethics of human subjects research. Most notably, in the Tuskegee syphilis experiments, 400 African-American men with syphilis were monitored

for 40 years (1932-1972) without being told of their disease ("History of Research Ethics," 2010). When this atrocity came to light, a commission was created which led to the creation of The Belmont Report (*The Belmont Report*, 1979). The Belmont Report remains the primary statement of principles of ethical research on human subjects today. It lays out three main principles (paraphrased):

1. Respect for persons
    a. Treat people as ends in themselves, not means to an end.
2. Beneficence
    a. Do not harm, and
    b. maximize possible benefits and minimize possible harms.
3. Justice
    a. Distribute the burdens and benefits of research equally across society.

In the United States, US code Title 46 contains the laws regulating federally-funded human subjects research. Most universities in the US apply these regulations to all research they conduct, even though technically the rules only apply to federally-funded work. The laws do not apply to research conducted at corporations or by private individuals, and obviously do not apply outside the United States.

What is a "human subject"? US Title 46 ("United States Title 46, Protection of Human Subjects," 2009) says:

"(f) *Human subject* means a living individual about whom an investigator (whether professional or student) conducting research obtains

(1) Data through intervention or interaction with the individual, or (2) Identifiable private information." (US Title 46.102.f, http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/45cfr46.htm#46.102)

But what is "private information"? The code continues:

"Private information includes information about behavior that occurs in a context in which an individual can reasonably expect that no observation or recording is taking place, and information which has been provided for specific purposes by an individual and which the individual can reasonably expect will not be made public (for example, a medical record). Private information must be individually identifiable (i.e., the identity of the subject is or may readily be ascertained by the investigator or associated with the information) in order for obtaining the information to constitute research involving human subjects." (Ibid.)

The notion of "private information" is a fundamental component of the definition of a human subject; however, that does not mean that such information needs to be hidden. Title 46 states that research should only be approved if:

> "When appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of data." (Ibid.)

The question this leaves then, is when is it "appropriate" to protect the privacy of subjects? This brings us back to the core principles of The Belmont Report, which states that we should not harm subjects (or at least minimize the chance of harm). The traditions of human subjects research have their roots in medical and psychological research. Just as medical records are kept confidential, it is appropriate to protect volunteers for medical and psychological research by disguising their identities in published accounts. However, these ideas translate less well to other forms of research.

In our study of Luis Castanon, failing to give him credit for his work would be harming him. Therefore, we are ethically obligated to give him credit for his work using his name, if the study contains no information that would be damaging to him, and if he chooses to be identified.

**From "Subjects" to "Participants"**

So far we have provided a simple critique of the prevailing norms of anonymizing subjects in written accounts. Anonymizing can do harm, and hence sometimes is inappropriate. Probing deeper, however, we might draw into question the fundamental notion of the speaking researcher and silent subject. Anthropologist Renato Rosaldo writes:

> "The Lone Ethnographer's guiding fiction of cultural compartments has crumbled. So-called natives do not 'inhabit' a world fully separate from the one ethnographers 'live in.' Few people simply remain in their place these days. When people play 'ethnographers and natives,' it is ever more difficult to predict who will put on the loincloth and who will pick up the pencil and paper. More people are doing both, and more so-called natives are among the ethnographer's readers, at times appreciative and at times vocally critical." (Rosaldo, 1993, p. 45)

Rosaldo studied llongot headhunters in a rural area of The Philippines through their transition from tribal society to increasing assimilation into "modern life." Certainly members of tribal cultures not literate in English were unlikely to have access to ethnographic accounts of their practices. Yet even in the extreme example of people at a pre-industrial stage of development, one might begin to ask the question: are the "natives" entitled to respond to our representations of them? The Belmont Report's first principle of respect for persons is grounded in Kant's second formulation of the categorical imperative—that one must always treat people as ends in themselves, rather than as means to an end (Kant, 1964). They are not a means to the end of better research results; they are intelligent, autonomous beings with dignity. To treat people as ends in themselves suggests that they are entitled to respond to our representations of them.

In the social science of 50 years ago, it was unthinkable to consider that our participants might respond to our representations of them. They had no access to our written accounts,

were presumed to have no interest in perusing them, and to have insufficient background knowledge to make sense of research reports in any case. Some of these assumptions may have been false then. They are all clearly false now, for most research.

The Internet plays a key role in research, even if we are not doing Internet research. The Internet increasingly gives our participants (even llongot ones) the ability to access our accounts of them. When the research topic is behavior on the Internet itself, we have even more reason to believe our research is accessible to our participants.

Treating people as ends in themselves also suggests that they might want to be repaid for the time invested in being a study subject by learning something from their experience. This is supported by the Belmont Report's principle of Justice, suggesting that we should equitably share the costs and benefits of research. Figure 1 is an example of participants benefiting from participating in one of our studies, and discussing this openly online.
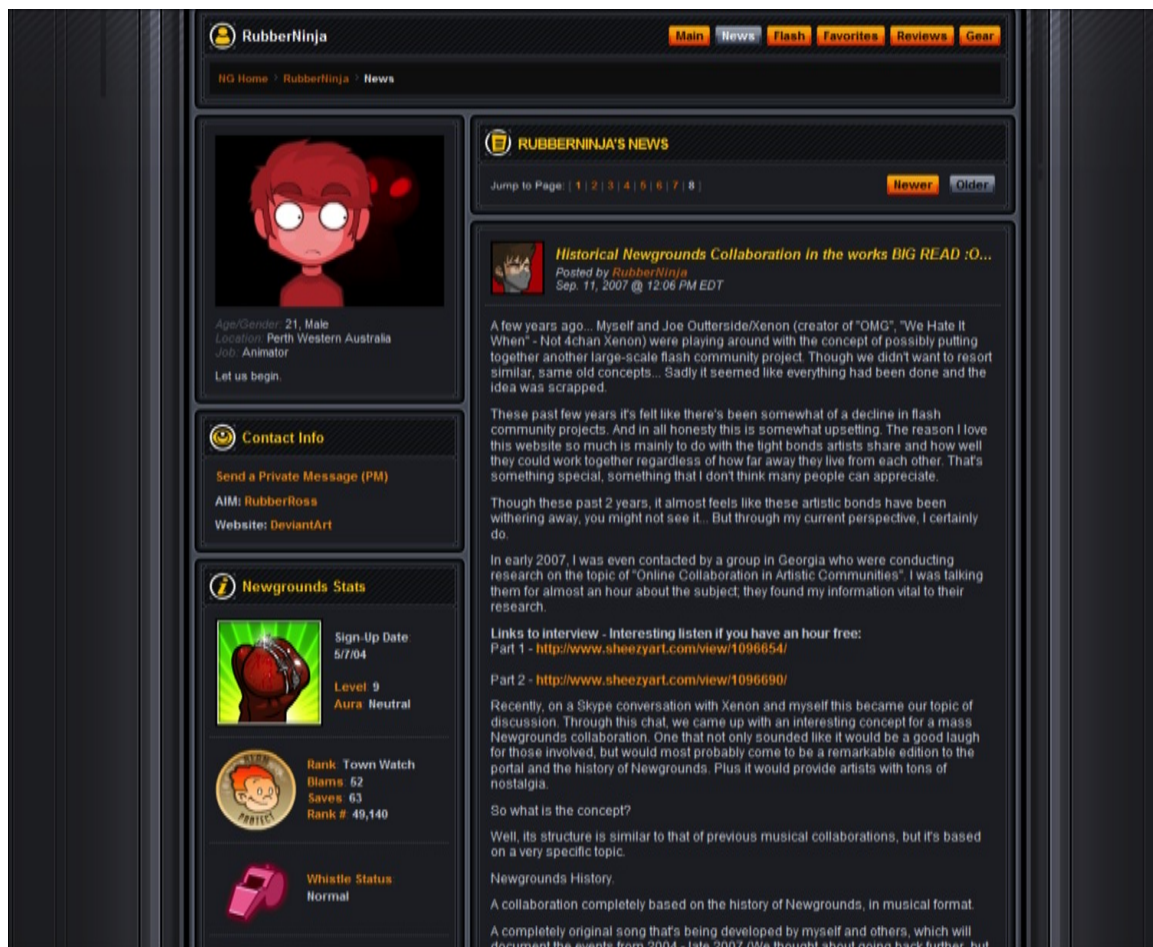


Figure1: Research Participants Post Their Own Recording of Our Interview, and Comment on Its Benefits to Them
(http://rubberninja.newgrounds.com/news/post/25437)

In this light, traditional research practice seems colonial: the enlightened researcher comes to investigate the ignorant savages. A post-colonial view suggests that the natives

are not ignorant, and have a right to respond to our representations of them. Further, their insights may substantially improve our accounts. It is true that the defamiliarized (etic) perspective of the outsider can lead to insights not possible from a native/insider (emic) point of view. But the etic point of view can be substantially enhanced by first-class participation of informants. In other words, sometimes the natives know exactly what is going on. Even if we may ultimately choose to discount their contributions or objections, we would never do so lightly, and need at least to give them the opportunity to speak.

Although we use the words "subject" and "participant" somewhat interchangeably, the word "participant" is preferred because it conveys a sense of people's agency. If one can make a coherent argument that llongat tribe members should be treated as participants rather than subjects, the argument is even more compelling for Internet users. The participants in our studies of the Internet are more than capable of finding our research reports. Research reports are more and more available online for free and not locked away in expensive subscription journals. Our research participants not only can, but likely will find our reports and respond to them. From a purely pragmatic perspective, we need to get into the habit of assuming from the start that they will respond, and plan how to make their response a productive contribution to the research process.

## Enter Jerry Springer

Where this gets murky is in the case of unflattering portraits of the participants. Research cannot be all sunshine and brilliant, creative videos. Sometimes things are darker, and unflattering accounts are both useful and necessary. To the extent that a portrait may anger or embarrass informants, the researcher has a tough choice. Showing the portrait to the informants may jeopardize a future research relationship with them, if any is desired. Depending on circumstances, the unflattering information could potentially harm the subjects, or could help them by drawing attention to something important. If the research participant is given the opportunity to offer their opinion of something unflattering, that response must be viewed critically (as all informant accounts must). It can be difficult to separate defensive behavior from valid objections to the legitimacy of the account. Thus, sharing accounts with informants pre-publication can be both a boost and threat to the validity of our accounts.

A simple policy for dealing with the new speaking subject would be to say: name them by name if they request it. However, unflattering accounts complicate the situation. Many people are fond of publicity. They will reveal extremely negative private information about themselves just for the opportunity, for example, to be on television. This happens routinely on television shows like *The Jerry Springer Show*, where guests talk openly about highly embarrassing behaviors, and shows like *COPS,* where people give permission to air footage of themselves being arrested (Calvert, 2000). This phenomena also occurs in Internet research (Cherny, 1999).

Just because someone asks for his or her real name to be used does not mean doing so is wise. The decision is ultimately a judgment call for the researcher, complicated by the

fact that we often do not know our participants well enough to judge whether naming them would harm them. Given a conflict between participants' wishes and what seems prudent for them, researchers sometimes need to err on the side of caution and anonymize participants against their wishes.

To over-ride the conscious choice of a subject is a somewhat uncomfortable exercise of power. However, being sensitive to power relations does not mean pretending such relations do not or should not exist. Ignoring someone's wishes is not something one does lightly, but sometimes it may be advisable or even necessary. Our consent form makes it clear that while we ask subjects' wishes, we cannot guarantee that we will be able to identify them by name even if they request it.

In Luther's studies of animators (Luther & Bruckman, 2008), we have had no problematic cases to date. However, we will see in a later section that in Fiesler's studies of fan writers and remixers, things get more complicated.

**Think of the Children**

If rational adults sometimes make questionable choices about their desire to be identified by name, what about children? In the United States, teens are more likely than adults to share content online (Lenhart et al., 2010), and many of the creative projects we encounter online are produced by young people. However, the question of how to identify (or anonymize) legally and ethically children's names adds a new layer of complexity to the discussion.

Our first study of Newgrounds included a set of interviews with members of collabs about their experiences with online leadership. In planning this study, we soon realized that most collab members were teenagers or even younger. We became convinced that we should interview some of these young people for our study. Not only did they represent most of the people working on collabs, but we were fascinated to learn how children could work together over the Internet to create some truly impressive movies and games.

For U.S.-based academic researchers who work with children, special consent procedures are typically needed. The state of Georgia, where we are based, defines a child as anyone younger than 18. Legally, children are not able to consent for themselves and their ability to enter contracts is limited. As a result, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at our university, which oversees all human-subjects research in compliance with federal regulations, generally requires researchers to collect two forms from child-participants: a "minor assent form" signed by the child and a "parental consent form" signed by the parent.

In conducting our interviews, we followed this standard procedure with one exception. The end of both forms included a question asking if the child wanted his or her real name used in our papers. Our expectation was that this question would prompt parent and child to reflect on the consequences of potentially creating a permanent, Google-able link between the child's identity and his or her contributions to Newgrounds. This extra

reflection seemed especially important for sites like Newgrounds, which boasts a dedicated category for fecal-themed submissions (Newgrounds, n.d.) and provided the fodder for a critical analysis of racist 9/11-themed Web animations (Van Buren, 2006). The risk of long-lasting negative exposure for creator of offensive or puerile material is real. On the other hand, controversial submissions on Newgrounds are often among the most popular, attracting hundreds of thousands of downloads, and it is often said in the entertainment industry that "there is no such thing as bad publicity." Indeed, some of our interviewees were students or aspiring artists who sought to use their Newgrounds portfolios as a springboard to a professional career in animation.

For this study, every child-parent pairing requested we use the child's real name where possible. But if a disagreement had occurred—for example, the parent requested anonymization but the child did not—we would have anonymized the child in every case, regardless of the preference mismatch. No one should be forced to be identified for participation in research, even if Mom says so.

The decision of whether to take credit for one's creations and statements is not likely one that a child is equipped to make on his or her own. What seems like a great idea at age 12 may turn out much less prudent a decade later. For our interviews, we would have insisted on the added protection of parental consent even if our IRB had not required it, since parents are better equipped than we are to judge the relative risks and benefits of anonymization for their child. If we think using real names could benefit a child in our study, we must secure parental permission to do it.

The corollary of this argument is that if for some reason we do not wish to seek parental consent, we must also give up the hope of letting that child use his or her real name. For example, it would be nearly impossible for researchers to create a large online community for children if each child needed to scan or fax documented proof of permission before signing up. In these situations, we and other researchers have typically sacrificed the child's ability to be identified for the greater good of being able to use the Web site at all. For instance, the registration page for MIT's Scratch programming community does not provide a "Name" field, instructs registrants to pick a username that is *not* their full name, and hides location information for anyone younger than 18. Scratch boasts over 890,00 registered members (as of October 2011), mostly children, who have created more than two million projects (Scratch, n.d.)—numbers hard to imagine if signing up required parental consent for children. Similarly, in developing Pipeline, our software for organizing collabs, we hide most profile information (including names) for users under 18. These anonymization procedures mitigate the need, at least from the IRB's perspective, for written parental consent, but the cost is that these young content creators are denied the ability to associate their names with their work.

In conducting ethical research, we must do all we can to protect participants' identities from harm while respecting their desire for credit, but we can only do so much. Children in practice make these decisions without parental involvement every time they post content online. Newgrounds, for example, allows contributors to list their real name, in addition to username, alongside their submitted movies and games, which are then

indexed by search engines. In this way, these authors are already permanently linked to their Newgrounds creations. This caveat extends beyond the special case of children; all of our participants, regardless of age, had the possibility of being identified with their online work prior to our study. When we use their names in our papers, we are only solidifying a bond that already exists.


**Mark Twain and the Problem of Pseudonyms**

In many studies of online activity, anonymizing subjects in any meaningful way is impractical. In particular, the "regulars" (Kim, 2000) of a site are often easily recognizable to all site participants. It is often necessary to disguise the name of the site being studied in order to disguise research participants. However, it does not provide a great deal of protection to refer to "a large Internet auction site"—people will know you are talking about eBay. If you write about the most active user of a Web site that provides technical news to a tech-savvy crowd, a significant number of people will know that you are talking about Slashdot founder Rob Malda, aka CmdrTaco. (Or perhaps we are really talking about Digg founder Kevin Rose, but people leap to assume we are talking about Malda.) Not just founders but core regular members of Internet sites often become de facto public figures, and hence difficult-to-impossible to disguise in published accounts. We have written elsewhere (Bruckman, 2002) about the challenges of disguising material in published accounts when that is necessary, and the range of practical strategies available. We note here that if CmdrTaco wants to be identified in our account, it makes things a whole lot easier.

Just as Rob Malda could easily be identified by referring to him as the most active user of Slashdot, he could just as easily be identified by referring to him as CmdrTaco. In early Internet research it was common for researchers to disregard pseudonyms as identities and quote them directly in published research rather than anonymizing (Frankel & Siang, 1999). However, pseudonyms are now typically treated as persistent identities worthy of the same ethical considerations as real names. One reason for this is that pseudonyms can be broken (e.g., by searching online for CmdrTaco and finding his real name associated with it) (Bruckman, 2002). Another is that pseudonyms on the Internet often carry as much weight in terms of identity and reputation as real names do. Therefore, in communities of creators, the same considerations for credit that we describe for real names should also be applied to pseudonyms.

In addition to Newgrounds collabs, another context in which we are studying online creativity is that of remix artists and fan creators. The latter includes fans of television shows, books, or other media who create stories, artwork, and videos based upon those existing sources. There are vast networks online of people creatively expanding the boundaries of *Harry Potter* and *Star Trek* and sharing these works with one another. We have been exploring this space as part of a larger research project on social norms around copyright in online communities, and have observed that the issue of credit and anonymity is complicated by pseudonyms.

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Writers have often published under "pen names" for a variety of reasons. In English-language literature, George Eliot and Mark Twain are two of a myriad of examples.[1] Fan communities had a long tradition of pseudonymity even before they were connected on the Internet, when stories and art were distributed in fanzines and at conventions. Accounts of fan culture have described the risks associated with participation (Bacon-Smith, 1992; Jenkins, 1992). Some of these exist because of the prevalence of eroticism and homosexual themes in fan fiction; fan creators might fear anti-obscenity laws, hold sensitive employment positions such as teachers, or face opposition from family members. Other reasons have nothing to do with the appropriateness of content; for example, those who aspire to write commercially are often told that publishers do not take fan fiction writers seriously. Still others are concerned about potential copyright entanglements. Beyond issues of risk, some fan creators use pseudonyms that echo some aesthetic or convention in their genre, or as pseudonyms become more common, others may adopt them simply because pseudonyms has become a norm of the community. This tradition still exists today, and in fact there are highly ingrained norms within the community against "outing" fans by connecting their pseudonyms with real names (Fiesler, 2008). Despite the lack of "real" names, social networks of fan creators can be closely knit, and these constructed identities just as important as their "real life" ones (Busse, 2006).

Our ongoing research in this space involves interviews with fan creators, and a consideration of the creative work itself is relevant to issues of copyright and norms. As with our study of animators, we planned to offer our participants the option to have their real names included in any publications in which we mention their work. However, from previous studies we knew that fan creators are often uncomfortable providing us their real names even under a seal of confidentiality, and prefer to be known entirely by their pseudonyms. Rather than considering the issue of real names to be moot, we decided simply to treat their pre-existing pseudonyms in the same manner as real names. Therefore, when we give them the option to wave anonymity, we ask *what* name they would want to be referred to in our publications in place of a fake pseudonym.

It is not the case that by eschewing the use of real names, creators are suggesting that they do not want credit for their work. Within fan communities, the desire for recognition among their peers is an important part of the culture, and influences norms of attribution not only with source material but also with each other (Fiesler, 2008). To be a BNF or "big name fan" is something to aspire to, and comes with increased recognition within the community, often reserved for the most popular artists or writers (Busse, 2006). Just as the name CmdrTaco carries a great deal of weight within Slashdot, there are writers and artists within fan communities who are influential without anyone knowing their real names. It is entirely reasonable that these creators would still want credit for their work in our publications, and they would want it tied to their established creative identity. Even one of our participants who is "out" with her real identity in fandom—she testified in front of Congress about copyright issues as related to fan-created videos—maintains a pseudonym for disseminating her creative work because that is how she is known. This pseudonym is how she collects social capital within the

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[1] See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_pen_names for a list of additional examples.

community, just as the lasting recognition for his literary achievement is associated with Mark Twain rather than Samuel Clemens.

Within the space of "people doing creative things online," the norms of different communities can diverge widely when it comes to values surrounding identity and credit (Luther et al., 2010). The example of fandom taught us that the choice between real names and anonymization, while often better than nothing, is too simplistic for some communities. Allowing participants to indicate *how* they want to be identified, if at all, can be as important as *whether* they are identified.


**The Practical Details**

Most of the ideas discussed in this chapter are made concrete in the consent forms that must be approved by our ethics boards and distributed to our participants. To give people the opportunity to express their wishes for anonymization, consent forms for most of our studies now include this language:

> **Using Your Name**
>
> In some cases, people we interview are proud of things they have done online (for example creative projects) and would like to have their name listed in our published reports. If you would like to request that we use your name if possible, please check the box below. We will not be able to use your name if we feel there is anything that might embarrass you in our report. For most people, using a fake name is the right choice, so you do not need to check the box but you may if you wish.
>
>
> Please use my name if possible (optional):  ☐
>
> What name would you like us to use? (optional)  _____

The text in this example applies specifically to interviews, but this is equally relevant to most forms of quantitative and qualitative data collection.

Luis Castanon was one of seventeen participants in our study of leadership in online creative collaboration. Of those seventeen participants, sixteen opted to use their real names in our papers (Luther & Bruckman, 2008). We have been surprised by how many of our subjects want their real names used, and also by the fact that to date this practice has generated no problems and few questions. That is likely because this new model of giving people credit for their work is not a contrivance—it is more logical and intuitive for research participants than the outdated model of a vulnerable human subject who needs to be anonymized for protection.

We offer this option in most but not all of our consent forms. To cite an extreme example, we obviously did not provide this option to participants in our study of use of mobile and social computing by survivors of domestic violence (Dimond, Fiesler, & Bruckman, under review). Other cases can be a more difficult decision. However, since the wording of the form allows us to use their real names, but does not require it, in most cases the wording is now included in our human subjects protocols.

Where possible, we allow participants to respond to our accounts of them before publication. Luis Castanon reviewed a draft of this chapter.  We take the opinions of our participants as seriously as possible, but also view their accounts critically and consider the possibility that their insider point of view could be misleading.

**Power and Paradigm Shifts**

It would be naïve to suggest that power relations between researchers and participants have shifted in any fundamental way. Although the ordinary blogger's voice now sometimes rises above the din, the truth remains that professional researchers are much more likely to be heard. And for the most part, that is as it should be. In theory at least, the researcher has special training that gives him or her a more insightful view of observed phenomena.  Users are becoming creators of content on the Internet, but that does not mean all voices can or should be heard at equal volume.

Nevertheless, something has changed. Our research participants have voices, and they will respond to our representations of them—whether we like it or not. There are no simple answers here—issues of minors online, potentially embarrassing accounts of people's activities, and content that people may later come to regret complicate the management of names and pseudonyms considerably.  However, our basic mindset about the nature of our undertaking needs to shift. The people whose online activities we chronicle are not anonymous "subjects," but "participants" in a collaborative process between researcher and participant in making sense of this new medium.

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