Ethical Dilemmas Within Online Literacy Research

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Abstract

As literacy researchers trace how people make meaning across multiple contexts and online environments, ethical complexities arise that require researchers to be culturally attuned, flexible, innovative, and reflexive. This article draws on a transliteracies perspective to argue that ethical issues related to accessibility, positionality, relationality, and temporality must drive literacy research in online spaces. It highlights international research situated in online environments to explore some of the ethical challenges, dilemmas, and opportunities that literacy researchers face as they conceptualize, conduct, and disseminate scholarship in a digital age. It seeks to move the literacy field forward by sharing guiding questions and provocations to inform digitally situated lines of inquiry and by offering recommendations for literacy researchers who seek to conduct ethical research in online spaces.

Keywords

ethics, online spaces, transliteracies, digital literacies

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Online spaces are rapidly emerging and evolving, and they cross into the physical world in new and sometimes unexpected ways. Today the *real world* is no longer solely defined through face-to-face interactions, and an online/off-line binary fails to capture the ways in which individuals and texts move within and across diverse networked contexts. For literacy researchers, these mobile practices, characterized by hybridity and emergence, contribute to new complexities in studying literacy. How do researchers account for the ways that young people during class send texts to one another to coordinate an assignment, share GIFs, and tell insider jokes—leading to an eruption of spontaneous laughter—even as a teacher leads discussion about a novel at the front of the room? How do researchers interested in young people's writing identities study their rich writing lives, not just their school essays but their Instagram poetry, fanfiction on Wattpad, and a novel saved in their iPhone notes? To address these complexities, researchers have turned to various methods and frameworks, such as connective ethnography (Leander & McKim, 2003) or transliteracies (Stornaiuolo, Smith, & Phillips, 2017). As literacy researchers who study issues of mobility across digital tools, hybrid spaces, and online communities, we are interested not just in thinking about possible methods for studying literacies on the move but examining the *ethical dilemmas* of such work.

Protecting our research participants is as important when they are writing, collaborating, and sharing in online environments as it is when they are situated within classrooms. Literacy researchers must consider complex ethical issues when designing, conducting, and disseminating online research. In this article, we highlight international studies of literacy learning in online spaces to consider how innovative scholarship requires similar innovative ethical standards and practices. Online spaces are dynamic and rapidly shifting, creating both opportunities and challenges for contemporary literacy research, particularly when individuals and artifacts move within and across networked contexts. We argue that there needs to be a critical, ongoing conversation around the ethical conduct of online research in order to advance our understandings of literacy and learning in a digitally mediated age.

Forty years ago, the Belmont Report proposed three key ethical principles to guide human subjects research: autonomy, beneficence, and justice. These address not only the rights of research participants but also the ethical responsibilities of researchers, calling attention to the critical importance of seeking informed consent, protecting vulnerable populations, maximizing benefits to society, minimizing risks to individuals, and striving for contextual integrity. Guided by law and policy, institutional review boards (IRBs) protect both research participants and researchers (Creswell, 2015), but board members are not always knowledgeable about the ethical concerns particular to online research. Most of the discussion of the ethics of online research focuses on: "(1) the distinction between public and private spaces; (2) obtaining informed consent from study participants; and (3) the assurance of participants' anonymity in research publications" (Knobel, 2003, p. 190). These discussions, and the related decisions of IRBs (known in some countries as human subjects review boards or university ethics committees), while necessary, often do not account for the reality

and contextual complexity of contemporary literacy research. For instance, both researchers and participants are often identifiable through their creative and academic profiles online, requiring researchers to grapple with how to represent themselves and others in a contextually flexible manner across the research relationship. Ethical guidelines traditionally employed in home, school, and community settings may not readily translate to studies in online spaces; researchers may find themselves needing to engage in advocacy for their line of inquiry and facing new questions about their own positionality that demand more flexible heuristics to guide decision-making. Conducting cross-cultural research involves even more sensitive negotiation, as researchers must tread carefully across potentially diverging ethical norms, cultural beliefs, and policy environments.

Two decades ago, the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) created a working group to study online research ethics, the outcome of which was a document to help researchers make ethical decisions about their online studies. In 2012, they released "Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research: Recommendations from the AoIR Ethics Working Committee Version 2.0" (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). This updated document drew on theoretical, empirical, and field-based research to offer guidelines and questions for researchers to consider, providing guidance beyond national statements such as the United States' Protection of Human Subjects Regulations, known as the Common Rule. The 2012 AoIR guidelines, currently under revision yet again, recognize that ethical issues are often both contextual and contested. The guidelines sought to draw upon the daily practices of online researchers across a wide range of disciplines, countries, and environments rather than prescribing a universal set of principles and regulations. Because online inquiry is often concerned with how people connect to, collaborate with, and learn from others within "networked publics" (boyd, 2011), we consider how the AoIR guidelines might shape the work of literacy researchers and other stakeholders, including universities and IRBs. We have found in our experience that literacy researchers face particular challenges in online research related to the mobility of people's meaning-making practices as they unfold over time and space.

Drawing on a transliteracies perspective to frame the emergence and mobility that characterizes literacy practices in a digital age, we argue that ethical issues related to accessibility, positionality, reciprocity, and temporality must drive literacy research in online spaces. By considering the complexity of literacy practices that traverse networked contexts, we explore some of the ethical challenges, dilemmas, and opportunities that researchers face as they conceptualize, conduct, and disseminate online research. In order to move the study of literacies forward, we highlight examples from innovative literacy studies, share guiding ethical questions and provocations to inform new lines of inquiry, and offer recommendations for literacy researchers who seek to conduct ethical research in online spaces. As literacy researchers, we recognize that where our ethical commitments lie is often shaped by our identities and places in the world, and we share ethical issues that have emerged in our own online scholarship. Rather than articulating universal ethical principles or being prescriptive in how

researchers should engage with ethical questions, we aim to share some of our own dilemmas to begin an important dialogue about the ethical conduct of online literacy research.

The Ethics of Studying Literacies on the Move

One of the central challenges in designing ethical guidelines for online literacy research is the complexity of studying those literacy practices in constantly changing contexts—without proposing a universal set of principles or "one-size-fits-all" model that imposes Western or colonial paradigms (O'Connell, 2016; Tuck & Yang, 2014). While the three ethical principles guiding human subjects' research (autonomy, beneficence, and justice) are helpful starting principles, the realities of online research make the application of those principles less clear-cut than we might imagine. In the malleable, emergent, and unpredictable landscape of online interaction, how can literacy researchers develop a repertoire of ethical moves that are flexible, responsive, and emergent?

To address this question and the challenge of ethically studying literacy practices online, we turn to a transliteracies perspective (Stornaiuolo et al., 2017), which theorizes the relationships between people, materials, and power in literacy practices "on the move" across networked contexts. As a flexible heuristic to guide researchers in studying people's mobile literacy practices, a transliteracies approach offers rich ground for considering how ethical considerations must be continually navigated over the course of online research. Specifically, it provides an inquiry approach for studying the amplified mobility of literacy practices in online spaces, offering a framework for researchers to consider the ethical implications of online research through an inquiry lens.

One of the central contributions of a transliteracies approach for considering ethics through inquiry is its attention to power, particularly the *paradox* that even as some forms of participation are facilitated online, others are constrained, limited, and oppressed. Thinking about how power and positionality are negotiated online—who benefits from these mobile practices, to what end, and under what conditions—requires researchers to consider how forms of participation are historically conditioned by systems of racism, colonialism, and patriarchy, which are now encoded into the very infrastructure and algorithms that shape online spaces (Noble, 2018). From an ethical standpoint, these questions of power and positionality are never settled and must be negotiated afresh in every encounter, opening new lines of inquiry as people, places, contexts, and things shift and move across online spaces.

Taking examples from our own research to illustrate how a transliteracies framing can prompt ongoing inquiry into the ethical dimensions of online research, particularly issues of power and privilege, we turn to one of the opening questions that we have all grappled with in our individual scholarship—how to study youth's writing identities across the spaces that matter to them (Instagram, Wattpad, school, etc.)? From a transliteracies perspective, such a question involves learning alongside youth

about what is afforded and constrained in these different spaces and for whom. This question required Jayne (Lammers & Marsh, 2018) to build a deep and sustained relationship with one young woman, tracing her writing practices over years and across multiple spaces. For Amy (Stornaiuolo & Thomas, 2018), such a question involved collaborative inquiry with youth and colleagues about the role of media in shaping what stories are told and by whom—and whose stories count in different spaces, particularly for youth from nondominant communities or marginalized identities. For Jen (Curwood, 2013) and Alecia (Magnifico, 2012), this question was explored with young people in online communities as they navigated online relationships and built affinities through fan practices. As adults working alongside youth across school and online spaces, we struggled with ethical dilemmas in these respective studies: how and when to access different spaces of importance to participants (dilemmas of accessibility), how to represent ourselves in those spaces and in relation to youth, especially given our identities as cis White women (dilemmas of positionality), how to nurture mutually constitutive relationships with participants, particularly when we have never met them in person (dilemmas of relationality), and how to represent young people's identities and their *publicly available* work over time (dilemmas of temporality). We turn now to explore how we engaged in inquiry as we examined these ethical dilemmas in our work—and how these dilemmas lead us to offer a set of inquiry questions and recommendations for researchers interested in developing a contextually sensitive repertoire of ethical moves.

Ethical Dilemmas in Designing and Conducting Literacy Research in Online Contexts

Ethical decision-making relies on deep understanding of a research context in order to maintain integrity to ethical principles and to the communities and practices we study, particularly in efforts to recognize the ways inequities are reinscribed within and across online spaces, especially for people from marginalized and racialized communities and identities (Noble, 2018). Such deep understanding can be challenging to accomplish when working across physical and digital spaces, with the complexity inherent in studying rapidly changing online spaces and mobile people and texts. Nonetheless, we see a need to wrestle with the challenge of developing deep understandings of our online research participants and contexts to ensure that we maintain contextual integrity in the ethical decisions of our research practice (Nissenbaum, 2010; Zimmer, 2018). Taking the affordances of online spaces into account shapes the design and conduct of ethical research as we consider implications related to accessibility, positionality, relationality, and temporality online. In discussing four of our primary ethical dilemmas below, we share how they emerged within our own research, frame their importance and relevance to literacy research, and offer illustrative examples that show how we and others have navigated ethical decision-making.

Considering Accessibility as an Ethical Dilemma

> After conducting studies of literacy and literature in English classrooms, I (Jen) became interested in how young adults were engaging with the *Hunger Games* trilogy in online spaces outside of formal instruction. I began like many young people: I went straight to Google. This uncovered a number of *Hunger Games*–specific websites and discussion boards, only some of which were publicly accessible; soon I also came across spaces within broader fandom websites, like FanFiction.net and DeviantArt.com, that were dedicated to the *Hunger Games*. When I went to apply for ethical approval at my university, I was conscious of the fact that my research questions would demand that I follow my youth participants across multiple online spaces and that it would be impossible to offer an exhaustive list at the outset, as the spaces themselves were often emergent or ephemeral in a way that was substantially different to the physical contexts integral to my prior research. For instance, one popular *Hunger Games* discussion board was deleted overnight, but fortunately, I had already saved posts by one of my study participants. As I collected data, I was reliant on my research participants to share what online spaces were instrumental to their experience of the fandom. In turn, my ability to access diverse *Hunger Games* online spaces allowed me to examine transliteracies practices such as fanfiction writing and online role-playing.

The research design of scholars must account for how they access online spaces and recruit participants. Due to the dynamic nature of online spaces, "no set of guidelines or rules is static" (Markham & Buchanan, 2012, p. 2). While this presents expansive opportunities in terms of studying new digital contexts and networked publics, it poses a number of practical and ethical challenges for transliteracies research.

The continuum of public and private in online spaces can mean that researchers may be restricted in terms of how they can access the space, particularly if it requires an account or password protection (such as Wattpad and Fortnite). For publicly accessible online spaces that do not require a password (like Twitter and Instagram), some IRBs will not require that researchers seek ethics permission, as data are within the public domain. Such decisions—about whether, how, and when to access online communities—are fundamentally ethical in nature. Some of the contextual variables include considerations about individuals' expectations of privacy, the content of the texts and whether the topics are personal or sensitive in nature, and the researchers' intentions in sharing, interacting with, or altering materials shared within the community. These considerations must be weighed against understandings of the current political, social, and cultural contexts that shape online participation and the stated identities of the members of the community (e.g., researching the texts that queer trans* youth post in a private online community will require different considerations than studying the spread of hate speech in a public 4chan forum). Researchers must be mindful that, particularly in spaces designed for people with marginalized identities, confidentiality may be a crucial condition of their participation, since identifying as a member may be risky in other spheres of their lives. This is part of the paradox of

mobility that constrains opportunities for some. At the same time, researchers need to also consider how their own identity may shape how they conceptualize and experience particular spaces, and how (or whether) they disclose aspects of their identity, including race, gender, or sexual orientation, to potential research participants.

While some spaces may not be password protected, they could be indexed by Google, which might unmask participants' identities and artifacts. Consequently, literacy researchers need to be aware that our writings may identify individuals, whether they have given informed consent to participate in the study or not. For instance, Curwood, Magnifico, and Lammers (2013) and Magnifico, Curwood, and Lammers' (2015) studies of online fanfiction writing intentionally did not quote at length from the publicly accessible creative works, as it would be easy to uncover some youth writers' identities. Instead, they chose to paraphrase or use short illustrative quotes to maintain creators' anonymity and protect confidentiality.

Once researchers have accessed the online space, they must consider how to both effectively and ethically recruit participants, such as through a publicly posted announcement and/or via private messages. As Gerber, Abrams, Curwood, and Magnifico (2017) note, some IRBs prohibit the use of private messages as a recruitment strategy, particularly for potential minor participants. In Stornaiuolo's (2015) Goodreads study, for instance, two adolescent participants from the United States preferred synchronous chat or asynchronous e-mail for both initial communication and data collection. While this has affordances, such as the ease of accessibility and the benefit of greater response time for thoughtful exchanges, there are also constraints including limiting opportunities to develop more mutually constituted understandings or face-to-face interactions. Ultimately, ethical considerations related to accessibility and recruitment are reliant upon participants (and their parents or guardians, if they are minors) having informed consent. But due to potential complications, Zimmer (2010) argues that many review boards are ill-equipped to evaluate research protocols that outline studies taking place in online environments.

One notable way that literacy researchers must navigate issues of accessibility in online spaces involves the recruitment of youth participants. In a recent study, Kovalik and Curwood (2019) sought to recruit youth poets (aged 13–25) to understand poetic literacy on Instagram. Driven by the growing amount of Instapoetry, the study sought to interview youth poets in order to understand the complexity of their mobile literacy practices. Due to the nature of the online space, recruitment involved researchers creating a new Instagram account and making multiple public posts (using popular hashtags such as #poetry and #instapoetry) to recruit potential participants. They also sent direct messages to individual poets, which contained information about participation in the study, including a link to the university website and an informational statement about the study. The IRB raised concerns with this approach and suggested focusing solely on adults and avoiding any direct recruitment. The researchers then had to advocate for online research and justify the need to include minor participants in the study. Kovalik and Curwood (2019) drew upon AoIR guidelines and precedents from other universities to support their methodological and ethical decisions in order

to proceed with the first study of Instapoetry and recruit youth participants from eight countries to reflect its global nature. They also cited Australia's National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007/2018) to show how the statement applied to research in physical as well as virtual contexts. In this respect, the investigation of transliteracies in emergent and evolving online spaces can demand that researchers consider issues of advocacy alongside accessibility.

Considering Positionality as an Ethical Dilemma

> Early on in my experience of conducting literacies research in online spaces, I (Jayne) faced ethical challenges around representation and recruitment that were unlike those I had encountered when studying classroom practice or surveying teachers. Whereas my prior work put me face-to-face with my participants or had me contacting teachers through their school e-mail addresses, recruiting in an online forum for *Sims* fanfiction writers presented me with less certainty about who was informing my research. I never met my participants, nor did I conduct synchronous audio/video interviews. Therefore, I relied on self-reporting, which I supported with any information available in online profiles, to develop a sense of my participants' identities. When presenting early findings from this study, a colleague questioned how I could be sure that my participant Angela was not a 35-year-old Black man. In responding to this question, I argued that while I could not in fact be sure, Angela's positionality in the forum mattered more because of the implications her identity had within the research site. Certainty about whether that identity matched her off-line identity offered little to my understanding of literacy practices within the Sims Writers' Hangout. Taking this stance about positionality, privileging how participants represent themselves online when the online space is the focus of the research, represents my commitment to ethical practice through contextual integrity in my work.

Online spaces afford people the opportunity to try on new identities and represent themselves in ways not always available in off-line spaces. Through their creation of avatars, the information shared on their profiles, and other multimodal contributions made in these interconnected literacy spaces, individuals position themselves as certain kinds of people; such positioning is uniquely responsive to the context of each networked public. Given the strong connection our field recognizes between literacies and identities (Lewis & del Valle, 2009; Moje, Luke, Davies, & Street, 2009), this affordance has inspired optimism among literacy researchers who study youth participation in online spaces. Black's (2005) work on English language learners' ability to access identities as English writers in Fanfiction.net's anime community and Wargo's (2015) study of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth "identity making" using Snapchat exemplify how some young people leverage digital literacies to push back on marginalization they experience in other contexts.

Our participants' ability to construct their online identities also presents researchers with the challenges of determining whether or not participants are who they present

themselves to be online and deciding whether that matters. While sharing our participants' age, race, gender, and other social factors as we situate them and their literacies in larger contexts may be a largely uncontested practice as we describe our research, we may or may not be able to verify that information in cases when we only know our participants in online contexts. For example, Lammers (2016) described her participant as a female high school student from a rural area of the United States but only had that participant's word and data from the online site to support this positionality. Issues of privacy, anonymity, and safety come into play here with respect to how our participants position themselves online and what the implications are for how we describe them in our research.

One key way such issues affect researchers' ethical decision-making revolves around the use of pseudonyms. While this fairly standard ethical practice aims to protect the researched and minimize risks that may come from revealing their identity, such protection may not always be possible when sharing data collected online, due to the searchability affordance (boyd, 2011). For example, in her study of United States and Scandinavian Deaf hip-hop artists' multimodal creations on YouTube, French (2016) recognized the challenge she would face when it came to sharing participants' videos as evidence of her findings. Demonstrating the multimodality meant showing these videos, and that meant revealing participants' online identities. Thus, she negotiated with her IRB to forgo the use of pseudonyms, did not promise anonymity to her research participants, and discussed the potential implications when securing their informed consent.

Relatedly, some participants may prefer to be known by their online identity, even in a research context. French's (2016) participants had constructed artistic identities on YouTube and thus felt invested in being known by those identities as their creations spread to the study's audiences. Similarly, Lammers' (2013) study of *Sims* fanfiction writers asked her to try to reconcile a participant's desire to be known by the online persona she created for herself across online platforms and the institution's demand that pseudonyms be used. Ultimately, the institution won out and the participant relented, but with disappointment that the brand she had been building as an online writer would not be recognized in published research. Other IRBs allow youth participants to choose to have their real names attributed to their creative work, such as in Curwood and Gibbons (2009) study of multimodal counternarratives.

Finally, literacy researchers need also consider the implications of positionality for themselves as they engage in this work. This requires decision-making about how to represent themselves as researchers and participants in the spaces they study. Black (2008) described having two separate accounts on Fanfiction.net: one for her fanfiction writer identity and one for her researcher identity. However, Knobel (2003) decided to utilize a single account on eBay, in part to position herself as an experienced user of the space when she approached potential research participants. Regardless of which approach a researcher chooses, establishing a consistent practice of presentation within a networked public remains important.

Considering Relationality as an Ethical Dilemma

As a member of Goodreads for many years, I (Amy) became interested in the educational potentials of the space, particularly for adolescents. I designed a study in which I contacted a teacher to see how she used it in her class, but I also wanted to learn how individuals came to use the space on their own. I belonged to several young adult (YA) book groups and had cordial relationships with some of the members. I had to decide whether to create a new account or use my longstanding account with history attached, and I was unsure how to represent my interest as a researcher (and not just fellow YA fan). Ultimately, I included my researcher information in my profile and mentioned my dual role explicitly in my recruiting messages. Many initial participants I contacted ignored me, and others responded with wariness. Since many members did not identify their age or gender in their profile, I often contacted people who were middle-aged women like myself. One young woman agreed to be in my study, confiding later that she only agreed because she compared our bookshelves and we had 63% overlap. While I developed a few deep relationships through the study, I had significant trouble convincing people I was a legitimate person interested in a mutually beneficial exchange—something much more effortful in this online space than my classroom research. And once I began speaking about my work in Goodreads, members of the public looked through my profile trying to ascertain which of my contacts was in my study. I had to follow many groups and individuals just to make it more difficult for others to trace which relationships were "personal" and which were developed through research.

While literacy scholarship has articulated the many ways in which research connects researchers and communities in networks of relations (e.g., Kinloch, Larson, Orellana, & Lewis, 2016; Paris & Winn, 2013), these relational dimensions can be more difficult to conceptualize and negotiate in online research. One difficulty can be the sometimes decontextualized nature of content online. For example, when multimodal texts circulate across the Internet, divorced from their original contexts and with ambiguous or absent authorship, researchers may have difficulty identifying, conceptualizing, or locating the people behind the texts. In Stornaiuolo's (2015) research with the Goodreads community, for example, she had a difficult time finding and connecting with adolescents. Most participants' profiles and postings did not identify their ages, and many people were reluctant to share information with a stranger. Even after recruiting individuals to participate in the study, it remained difficult to track down and identify the people who commented, posted, or otherwise interacted with the study participants in order to get their permission.

Another challenge revolves around how to establish and develop relationships with participants, especially given the relational demands intertwined with different methodological approaches. Methodologies range from participatory, with researchers and participants developing sustained and mutual relationships across time and space (e.g., Wargo, 2015), to textual, which involve no interaction with people but instead focus

on texts posted in public archives, discussion boards, and online communities (e.g., Kim, 2016). Since researchers' interactions with participants are mediated by digital technologies, it can be difficult to establish relationships with individuals—and many researchers do not attempt to contact authors of postings in online forums to establish any relationship (e.g., scraping Twitter feeds), raising ethical considerations about authorship and ownership. When researchers do interact with individuals, many times those interactions involve primarily textual communication (e.g., chat interviews). While textual forms of connection can make it easier in some cases to develop close relationships and intimacy over time, it may be just as easy for a participant to "disappear" and stop communicating (and often, the researcher only knows the participant through screen names and self-reported information).

This question of researcher positionality in navigating relationships in online spaces is an important ethical consideration. Historically, research has been rooted in histories of surveillance, human exploitation, colonial logics, and racial superiority (Tuck & Yang, 2014; Tuhiwei Smith, 1999). If literacy researchers are concerned about not reproducing these harmful and oppressive relationships, a critical approach to online research demands an accounting of power and material inequities between the researcher and the researched (Mignolo, 2009). Without careful thought, online researchers can engage in silencing, appropriating, and surveilling participants, especially when texts are posted anonymously or publicly and literacy researchers share stories that may not be theirs to share (Tuck & Yang, 2014). As online literacy researchers try to create more mutually beneficial research relationships that involve trust, they need to think about how they present themselves to participants online, how power mediates those relationships at different points in time, and how to navigate the needs and desires of different stakeholders. A central ethical consideration in online literacy research is the management of these relational dimensions of scholarship that emerge in practice.

Considering Temporality as an Ethical Dilemma

Over the years, I (Alecia) have spent many hours reading across participants' discussion board posts, character descriptions, and profiles. Whereas face-to-face field notes represent a moment that passes in space and time, participants' online artifacts often remain fixed. When their online lives change, these differences create dilemmas. Is it ethical to write up studies using visible artifacts whose true context may be invisible? What stories are legible to others? After I'd concluded my *Neopets* fieldwork, in the midst of conducting final interviews, one of my participants' accounts was hacked. Kay (her pseudonym) thought, initially, that she was hacked because her account was valuable: well-known, many years old, original "unconverted" Neopets. Later on, messages suggested that she'd been targeted by a vengeful, unsuccessful guild applicant. Despite her status as a paying subscriber, she found it impossible to reinstate or protect her account— she never received a response to her help request. She grew frustrated, quit the game, and,

occasionally, instant-messaged me to process these events. We talked about life online and rapid change. She wondered about her long-time trading and writing partnerships. She mourned even though she did not feel like she was allowed to mourn because it was just *Neopets*, just pixels, but the game was a big part of her life, suddenly erased.

After 6 years of hanging out with her closest Neofriends in different online and face-to-face spaces, the Neopets game was sold to a new company and she built some hope. She tried again to reinstate her account, this time successfully. Now, her profile badge shows 17 years of play. The badge is simple, and as Kay put it when we reviewed this history, "somehow all the shit that went down happened without leaving a trace." Six years of absence evaporates. Her badge reminds me that an artifactual history or a research report can obscure how life twists over time. I've never told Kay's "whole" story before, partly because my work has focused on players' writing. Because the hacking wasn't about her Neopets collaborations, it never felt like my story to tell. It affected her life deeply, though—and so many online writers have similar experiences.

Studying online spaces asks us to consider time in multiple, layered ways. While literacy researchers cannot access the history of a face-to-face space as we observe it in the present, it is possible in online spaces to look back and seek patterns in past message threads, projects, or profile photos. As a result, many qualitative researchers have been tempted to employ data collection schemes that would be clearly unethical in face-to-face settings. Knobel (2003), for instance, decries "snatch-and-grab" studies (p. 192) where researchers spend a short amount of time in an Internet space before pulling data and writing about participants—an act that often leads to misrepresentation or breaches of contextual integrity (Zimmer, 2018). Such studies become more possible when researchers see online spaces as catalogs or chronicles of particular networked publics. As a result of the persistence and searchability of tools like discussion boards, social media profiles, and news feeds (boyd, 2011), many researchers have employed methods that treat Internet posts as archives. It is important to remember, though, that historical papers that have been deliberately collected and placed in the care of a library, whereas online literacy practices are living, human, complex, and responsive to the evolution of technologies (boyd, 2014).

Part of the reason that such behavior feels plausible and defensible may be the sense that Internet spaces exist in a separate space and time, outside of face-to-face reality. Leander and McKim (2003), for example, conceptualize a spatial perspective on "connective ethnography" of online spaces (see also Fields & Kafai, 2009, and Magnifico, Lammers, & Curwood, 2013). In this piece, Leander and McKim (2003) note that often, "...the Internet is made out to be a separate social space" (p. 212) through online/off-line binary understandings of online activity. Research on online literacy practices may thus seem less impactful than research on face-to-face activities. Ethnographic work, however, shows that for many people, particularly teenagers, online and face-to-face interaction spaces are fundamentally intertwined. People hang out by playing games together or commenting on each others' photos when in-person contact is restricted or impossible (e.g., boyd, 2014;

Ito et al., 2013). In other words, research participants use transliteracy practices to share conversations and media across and through a complex map of online and off-line spaces (Stornaiuolo et al., 2017).

Much of the available work on methods for studying digital communications take on similar spatial frameworks—an online "space" is one site for contact. Time, too, however, is a complex phenomenon that deserves further attention, perhaps particularly in studies of learning and literacy (Buchholz, 2016). While sociocultural contexts are often defined by their social, cultural, and historical aspects in recent work, older conceptualizations of context include discussions of the times and spaces in which the literate activity occurred (Compton-Lilly, 2014). Time has been often elided in discussions of online research, but participants live in contexts tied to space and time, and they build online literacy practices and identities that are intertwined with face-to-face happenings (Compton-Lilly, 2014; Leander & McKim, 2003).

One key ethical decision related to time may involve participants who persist over years, through substantial shifts in their identities. Their profiles, histories, and artifacts exist in a time line that seems current while their self-definitions may change (Lammers & Marsh, 2018). For example, many of the US and Canadian high school and university students in a study of *Neopets* (Magnifico, 2012) told few people about their play in a game that many of them had begun as tweens. They maintained diverse motivations for their continued play, however, including the status afforded by old/accomplished accounts, spaces for creative coding and writing, and long-time friendships. Such participants' profiles and artifacts bore persistent, interpretable attributes such as badges from past events, but the meaning of these markers evolved as their play changed alongside their lives. A quick look at such profiles might lead a researcher to see and represent such players as long-time, avid fans of the game, when participants' own understandings and relationships to *Neopets* were much more complicated.

Another ethical consideration may involve timely access to data. While it is near impossible to remove some information from the Internet, artifacts can suddenly disappear when a site closes down or a participant deletes work. Such situations combine with the difficulty of fully archiving multisited spaces to create time gaps in data collection. *Figment*, a site for young authors, reinvented itself as *underlined* in 2018, deleting all content with little warning. Thus, the data cited in Magnifico et al.'s (2015) and Padgett and Curwood's (2016) studies no longer exist, potentially raising questions about their veracity. Magnifico (2012) found that deletion is an ongoing feature of some spaces, too, not just a product of full-scale change or site removal. *Neopets* auto-erased message boards that reached 25 pages or included banned words, though traces of conversation sometimes remained after original boards had "poofed." A researcher's interpretations, quotations, and screenshots are necessarily partial and interpretive—even more so when original records become inaccessible. Furthermore, particularly when participants delete their own histories, ethical questions are raised because researchers have the power to quote old data in publications, potentially making it accessible again and reversing a deliberate choice.

The temporal persistence, and occasional disappearance, of participants and their data creates new ethical challenges for researchers in online spaces. Moreover, participants and users of online spaces may not often consider these matters explicitly. We as researchers should do so, though, because publication has the ability to further fix their participation in time and space.

Moving the Field Forward

Below, we offer a few illustrative questions that connect our arguments about accessibility, positionality, relationality, and temporality to the central phases in the research process when they might be taken into consideration. We then highlight a few key recommendations to inform ethical decision-making from our transliteracies perspective, and close by offering some concluding thoughts about future directions in this important work.

Questions to Consider

As we draw on the above descriptions and examples to think about how to move the field forward in consideration of the complexities and affordances literacy researchers encounter when they study online spaces, we find the guiding questions available from AoIR (Markham & Buchanan, 2012) a useful anchor. As a means of helping researchers think through how to maintain contextual integrity, we offer the following illustrative questions, inspired by AoIR's guidelines and contextualized for the literacy field. The list provided in Table 1 is not meant to be exhaustive or prescriptive. Rather, we find these questions most relevant to the issues raised in this article and present them here as a descriptive starting point for those interested in designing and conducting transliteracies research.

Recommendations for Literacy Researchers

(1) *Ensure that the research process includes extended time getting to know the networked public to inform ethical decision-making.* Leaving enough time to thoroughly map the online space before designing a research project is crucial. Such time allows the researcher to learn about the technologies and practices that facilitate interaction within the networked public. In some spaces, activity happens primarily on one root website while others use a variety of spaces and applications to communicate. It helps to get a sense of the norms for introductions and joining in. Researchers must think, too, about how the design of the online space represents participants and their activity over time. Spending extended time will allow researchers to generate context-informed answers to the questions we provided above.

(2) *Work toward transparency in online literacy research, even when doing so might raise challenges for recruitment.* Members of an online space are likely to assume

Table 1. Questions to Ask During Key Stages of the Online Research Process.

Stage of online research process	Questions that address issues of accessibility, positionality, relationality, and temporality
Conceptualization and design	• What are the implications for accessing and including publicly available online data in the study, as a sole or primary data source? • What are the ethical considerations for recruiting from vulnerable populations, such as minors? • How can researchers negotiate with institutional review boards and advocate for their methodological choices and ethical decisions? • What are the implications of being visible as a researcher in the networked public under study? • What are the ethical considerations of using either real names or pseudonyms for study participants? • How can researchers weigh the need to protect participants with critiques of a patriarchal system in which researchers' quest for protection conflicts with participants' preferences about anonymity (e.g., to see anonymity as a silencing act)? • How will researchers plan to capture data in an efficient and timely manner?
Implementation	• How does working with youth impact negotiations of power in the research relationship? • How might researchers develop mutually beneficial relationships with participants? • What are the ethical implications of enacting participatory research models within networked publics? • What responsibility do researchers have to be transparent about their motives and actions to participants? • What are people's rights to their texts, and how do researchers respect those rights, even when it is difficult to pinpoint authorship? • How can researchers ensure that they document the necessary context as they collect data from within a networked public?
Analysis	• What are the immediate and long-term ethical implications of employing analyses that require directly quoting from persistent publicly available online data? • What contextual values of the networked public need to be considered in order to ethically interpret the data? • How can researchers maintain relationships with participants they only know online to employ strategies, such as member checking, that increase the trustworthiness of their findings?
Dissemination	• What are the participants' expectations for the presentation of their online personas? How might this presentation situate participants in time? • In what ways do researchers benefit personally from the study, and does this pose ethical dilemmas? • What are the current or potential future risks of including directly quoted data in presentations or publications, given the persistence and searchability of online material?

that a new member's interest comes from a desire to join in, not from a potential research study. As such, transparency is key. One form of transparency may include posting information about the study and the researcher in the researcher's online profile; another may include revealing the researcher's position in the community, whether as a new member or a long-established participant who now wants to study the space. This commitment to transparency will lead to deeper and more meaningful relationships and avoid participants feeling compromised in finding out someone's interest in them is motivated primarily by research.

(3) *Investigate the implications for the persistence and spreadability of data being collected and disseminated.* It is important to consider the ethics of analyzing and presenting online information that, while readily available, was originally created and posted for other purposes. Whether researchers have direct permission from creators or they scrape data from the public domain, sharing texts out of context and in ways that might point back to their creators involves risks. People often see online communities as safe and private spaces for sharing intimate details of their lives with others (often anonymously) and do not imagine that their words or images will travel outside the contexts in which they were originally posted. Researchers, however, can amplify those texts and reach new audiences, compromising anonymity and raising questions about who has rights to use those texts and in what contexts. Researchers need to consider whether they have the right to tell others' stories and how online research can be used as a mechanism of surveillance, even when not intended to be so by the researcher. Also, the laws and policies governing whether or not data posted by people from other countries or on sites hosted in other contexts can legally or ethically be shared are an important consideration. Relying on a transliteracies framework encourages researchers to look beyond the ethics constructed in their own cultures and paradigms to recognize the need to think deeply about contextual integrity as it relates to place.

Future Directions

Despite the persistence of information shared on the Internet, our online writing and participation unfold in space and time—in broader contexts that may or may not be reflected as messages move and spread to new settings in new ways. We do not expect that the ethical dilemmas we have described here will remain stable as online life and communication continue to evolve or even that they will be the primary dilemmas that literacy researchers may face. To represent our participants' online experiences fairly and ethically, though, they must be considered. As we reflect on the 2018 Literacy Research Association conference theme, "Reclaiming Literacy Research: Centering Activism, Community, and Love," we wonder what it means to love our research participants who share their literacies and lives with us. What does it mean to interpret their truths with love so that the field as a whole can best learn from them?

Many of us have encountered situations in which participants wanted or needed to be represented in particular ways, with and through the texts and artifacts they share

online. Collectively, we have experienced many situations in which participants requested autonomy to choose particular representations—not to be restricted by our studies' approved frameworks. The stakes for our decisions about these issues are amplified for research in online spaces, where the permanence (or impermanence) of people's materials is always unsettled and thus unpredictable. When online literacies unexpectedly spread to a host of new audiences and time-spaces, some friendly and some hostile, the Internet can be an intimidating backdrop for publicly sharing work under one's name. And yet, literacy researchers often encounter participants who passionately do so (e.g., French, 2016; Kovalik & Curwood, 2019). Although the tradition of many IRBs dictates that we provide confidentiality to those who are researched, sometimes advocacy for and trust in their choice to self-disclose may be the most loving course of action that researchers can take. To act in just and beneficent ways toward participants, it may be important for researchers to provide them with this autonomy.

As literacy researchers interested in the dynamic nature of digital communications and connections, we cannot help engaging with the deep questions that the cluster of online and off-line "sitings" (Leander & McKim, 2003) we have presented under these four considerations raise for what it means to do loving, ethical literacy research in a posttruth era. We know that when content scales and spreads rapidly through responses, reposts, and remixes, it can become difficult for researchers, and for individuals, to understand what a text means to various real and imagined audiences. When technologies allow us to build directly on each others' work for a variety of aims, meaning can become a muddy concept, as do collaboration, attribution, and authorship. Many researchers and IRBs have noted that *public data* that are available on the Internet are also available for academic study, but such a wide precedent can create violations of contextual integrity. Sharing publicly may ensure that users' posts are likely to move and shift as they are read, discussed, and reshared across contexts (Stornaiuolo et al., 2017), but it does not necessarily mean that users are eager to participate in research (Nissenbaum, 2010; Zimmer, 2010, 2018). Those of us whose work ventures into these complex shifting concepts and contexts are setting new precedents for how we study and report on the literacies fostered within networked publics. In this article, we have begun working toward new frameworks to help us do so in ethical ways, with care.

In our future work, we plan to take up these considerations in ways that continue to honor the complexity and mobility of transliteracies. The framework of transliteracies offers us new ways to understand how online artifacts, posts, stories, and visual images are shared and transformed by participants across contexts (Stornaiuolo et al., 2017). Thus, it opens new ways to understand how researchers represent—and sometimes misrepresent—our participants' experiences, too. While the AoIR working group's ongoing examination of ethical decision-making in online contexts is valuable (Markham & Buchanan, 2012), studies of online literacies and how they function as social practices provide different lenses for this work. As online communication changes and evolves, literacy researchers must continue to observe and describe how

research ethically responds to these shifts. We see opportunities to grapple with what it means to center notions of respect for the myriad stakeholders in our work and to reconsider enactments of reciprocity in community-based online research. Above all, we seek to reclaim the humanity in online human subjects research.

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