

Case 4

In 2000 a reporter for the New York Times, developing an article about gay and lesbian teenagers and the Internet, posted a notice in an on-line chat room. The reporter received responses from a number of adolescents, and followed up by meeting and talking with them. She learned that the Internet was helpful to many children with questions about their sexual identity. For example, children who worried about their homosexual interests found support from others in similar situations. Many found consolation in discovering they were not "the only one". Some were developing mutual interests and even falling in love.

Adolescent lust made its presence felt in these interviews as well. One teenager reported he had been visiting pornography sites, and thrilling to the experience, since age 11. The reporter asked teens about sexual experiences ("cybering") they had carried out on-line. Masturbation to sexy messages and pictures was common. The reporter learned some teens had been in contact with people many years older who were interested in them sexually, and that one boy had hacked his way into the account of someone in whom he was sexually interested, viewing and deleting messages from a competitor.

In one instance, the reporter traveled to a rural Southern town and met with a 15 year old boy without the knowledge of his parents. Such an approach would not be permitted by the codes of conduct for researchers in areas other than journalism (e.g. psychologists and sociologists) relative to the protection of research subjects. Such protections are considered particularly important when dealing with children; for example, typically interviewers are not allowed to question children without their parents' consent. Particularly when topics are sensitive (e.g. sex, religion, illegal activity) parental consent must be obtained before children can be asked to give information.

The reporter's article in the New York Times stressed the value of the Internet for early exploration of sexual identity, especially for children who are isolated and worry about their parents' reactions. While articulating many benefits of a cyberculture protected from prying eyes, however, the article made clear the dangers of sexual predation. Still some critics of the article worried that in touting the benefits of on-line conversations, the article may have the result of exposing naïve or troubled teens to sophisticated sexual predators.

The Society of Professional Journalists recognizes a commitment to avoiding harm. It appreciates that "gathering and reporting information may cause harm," and that reporting is "not a license for arrogance." The Society further recognizes the importance of being especially sensitive when dealing with children, as well as an obligation to the "voiceless," and to support exchange of viewpoints, especially those that others might loathe to air.