# Researching Public Sites/Communities

## Research Involving Interaction with Participants – Public Sites or Communities

Similar to paper and pencil surveys or in-person interviews, recruiting participants via a public site to take an online survey or participate in an interview for the purpose of collecting research data would constitute data collected through intervention or interaction. This would meet the criteria for research involving human subjects and IRB submission/review would be required. The researcher must follow the appropriate consenting requirements as well as any of the site’s privacy and ownership policies.

## Research that does NOT involve Interaction/Intervention – Public Sites/Communities (Observational/Data mining)

* Fully public sites. Any internet user that can access and search a site without a required login or username, there is a general understanding that the information posted within such a site is public. Examples would be Craigslist or The Whitehouse on Facebook, public blogs and forums. Thus, the information posted on such a site would not be considered private and would not constitute human subjects and would not require IRB approval.
* Public sites requiring user log-in. Such a site would require users to log-in or register to post and/or read other users’ comments (e.g., Fastweb). Anyone willing to supply personal information (e.g., name, e-mail address) can obtain a username for the site. Users vary in the degree to which their usernames provide identifying information (e.g., “Ella\_Smith” vs. “doglover1”); however, there is a general understanding that the information shared between users within such a site is public (there is no expectation of privacy for individuals who post here). Thus, the information posted on such sites would not constitute private information and would therefore not require IRB approval.
* Public sites requiring invitation by site administrator. Such a site requires users to register to gain access to information shared by a community of users. The specific parameters of usage will vary from site to site. However, the following scenarios provide examples of such parameters: the site may have a “user agreement” that community members refrain from certain activities (e.g., that they not advertise products on the site, that they not divulge personal information about other users, etc.); the site might require one to be invited by a central administrator in order to join the community; or postings might be moderated by an administrator for content. Facebook is an example of such a site when individual users act as personal administrators of their own web pages and when they limit access to their personal information (e.g., by virtue of “friending” certain users). In such cases, there is a greater expectation of privacy and information posted on such sites may constitute private information that would require IRB approval.
* Please contact an IRB administrator with your proposed research to get confirmation that your project does not need IRB approval. Please submit a summary of what data you will be viewing/analyzing and from what type of websites.