(2000b)maintains there is a counter argument.While attracting vulnerable participants is an ever-present possibility,the Internet also has the ability to access participants who might otherwise be unable to particioate or who traditionally may not have been able to have a voice in research projects.For a variety of reasons(e.g.,geographic,disabilities,situational)researchers are sometimes not able to access specific people or populations.In certain circumstances,Net-based research can provide greater inclusivity by accessing these population.

Some researchers who wish to obtain consent have creatively used the forms feature on Web pages to obtain information.Figure5.1 is an example os an online consent form by Nora Boekhout(http://www.teacherwebshelf.com/) at simon Fraser University(for consent from see http:// modena.intergate.ca/personal/ boekhout/technologyincurriculum/ethicsforms.html). While the information on the form is standard for Simon Fraser University,notice that this pnline consent form has a section for a witness whereby the e-researcher may follow-up and verify the participant through the witness information.While there are no guarantees that the witness is credible(or even exists for that matter) this does provide another way to authenticate the research participants.Also note the active nature of required participation as contrasted with the way most of us casually click past license information (without reading) when first using new software packages purchased or downloaded from the NET.
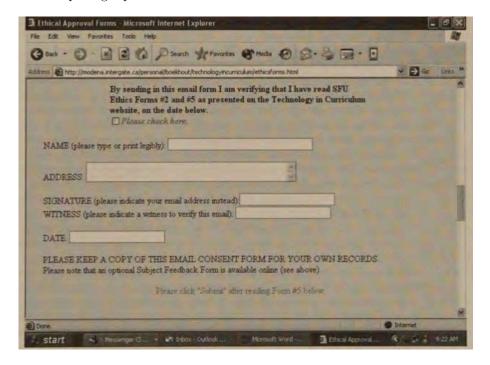

FIGURE 5.1   Example of an Online Consent Form(Developed by Nora Bockhout.)

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Finally,it needs to be noted that there are certain circumstances when the Net should probably not be used to obtain consent.These circumstanes include situations where the consent of guardians of minors or that of persones of diminished mental capacity is required.We advise against this for the protection of *both* the e-researcher and the participant.

WHEN IS CONSENT NEEDED?THE PUBLIC VERSUS PRIVATE DILEMMA

Informed consent is needed in almost all types of research with two notable exceptions.First,consent is generally not required to study an activity that is nonintrusive and takes place in a public space.For example,it is not necessary to obtain consent when undertaking naturalistic observations(for example,when studying linguistic patterns of fans' chanting at a football game).Neither is it usually neccessary to obtain permission when studying a public record or archive.For example,it is not necessary to obtain permission to study the public speeches of politicians,perform content analysis of newspapers or other mass media,or to study the public record of proceedings form a legislature.It is possible to argus that this notion of public space is appropriately extended to the study of activity on public newsgroups,mail lists,char rooms,or virtual reality environments(e.g.,MOOs,MUDs).Specifically,as these kinds of online spaces are open for anyone to join and,hence,can be interpreted as a public spaces,informed consent from every participant is not required since the researcher is often not participating and,thus,not affectain the interaction that takes place.

Or is it a public space? This interpretation is not as straightforward as some e-researchers would like it to be,as the sense of what is public or private is defined not by the technology,but by the perception of privacy and inclusion that is maintained by the participants.Imagine,for a moment,that you are in a public park and you need to use the public washroom.As you are leaving this public facility you notice there is a video camera in each of the washroom cubicles.How do you think you might feel to learn that this is part of a research project? As King(1996)notes,with this kind of example "The sense of violation possible is proportional to the expectation of privacy that group members had prior to learning they were studied." Forexample,studies with virtual self-help groups have shown remarkable candor among participants and the publication of this content has been viewed by some participants as a violation of the privacy of the group(Sharf,1999).An additional factor determining private space is the degree of intimacy that the researchers is studying.King notes that,generally,activity in a public place does not require informed consent.For example,noting how people are sitting on park benches.Nevertheless as Waskul and Douglass(1996)point out,if one installs a tape recorder and records conversations that take place on that park bench,a much different level of consent is required for ethical research.

Waskul and Douglass(1996)remind us further that "ethical consideration" should entail an interplay between codes of conduct and an intimate understanding of the nature of the online environment." To behave ethically requires explicit and expert knowledge of the context within which the researcher functions.The Net is made up

of a diverse set of technological and cultural contexts.For example,the ethics of analyzing the interaction in a large public discussion board sponsored by a media outlet such as the *New York Times*,call for far different means to protect privacy than research involving privante emails.Funther,codes of conduct may apply differentially to different types of research.For example,the study of anonymous language use in public online chat rooms and the publication of results requires different levels of individual disclosure than a study that is focused on identifying appropriate teacher/student interventions during an instructional class using the same Net-based chat technology.Thus,even though the technology is the same,different standards of ethical research behavior are required for these different research investigations.

To help the e-researcher determine when and what type of consent is required,many of the formal professional and research granting bodies provide guidelines that can help address some of the gray areas of ethical research.The 1994Canadian code of Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans(http://www.nserc.ca/programs/ethics/english/policy.htm)defines research participants "living individuals or groups of living individuals about whom a scholar conducting research obtains(1)data through intervention or interaction with the individual or group,or(2)identifiable private information." Applying these guidelines can be helpful in determining when naturalistic observations(as,for example,noting the lengh of posting or language used in public Usenet groups)become personal interventions.Is the researcher has no interaction or intervention with the participant and if there is no disclosure of private information,then it is generally not necessary to obtain informed consent from the particlioants . Unfortunately,ethical issues are sometimes very complicated in Net-based research.making it unclear how to apply existing consent guidelines. In these cases , judgment calls must be made to defend choices that require or dispense with requirements for consent.The American Psychology association ethical code for researchers(Draft6.1 at http://www.apa.org/ethics/)notes that "before determining that planned research(such as research involving only znonymous questionnaires,naturalistic observations,or certain kinds of archival research)does not require the informed consent of research participants,psychologists consider applicable regulations and institutional review board requirements,and they consult with colleagues as appropriate." In keeping with this guideline,it is advisable that the e-researcher consult with colleagues and institutional review boards prior to dispensing with consent.

REDUCING THE POTENTIAL TO HARM

The second core value that underlies e-research is to insure that the e-researcher avoids,through the research process,possible harm to research participants or nonparticipants who are affected by the researcher's activities.The most common form of harm comes from inadvertent or purposeful exposure of the participants in ways that are perceived by those involved as damaging or hurtful.Examples of harm may include not only physical injuries but also loss of privileges (an inability to participate in an activity) ,inconvenience (i.e., wasted time , frustration , boredom) , psychological injuries (insults , loos of self-esteem , embarrassment) , economic losses (job , entrance into