

CHRIS MANN: QUALITATIVE DATA AT YOUR FINGERTIPS

Paper summary for session on Online Research Methods

The excitement of working with an interviewing medium which is not constrained by boundaries of time and space, and which offers qualitative digital data literally at the fingertips, is matched by the growing realization that the virtual venue makes practical, legal, ethical, and interpersonal demands which move beyond the knowledge and expertise that may have been acquired by off-line interviewers.

This paper will look at two challenging areas:

- Developing expertise as a qualitative researcher conducting asynchronous interviews
- Conducting ethical research online

Expertise in asynchronous interviewing

There are two kinds of expert online: the technically astute and the 'relationally' astute. While a level of technical competence is essential, successful qualitative interviewing also requires researchers to acquire 'relational' expertise. Reading signs of the other is a human characteristic which many face-to-face qualitative researchers develop to the level of a skill. But is it possible to 'connect' at these emotional and mental levels when communicating online?

The fear is that online interviewing cannot achieve a high level of interactive communication – and that the data produced will be inferior.

The following aspects of developing online relational expertise will be discussed:

Developing rapport with participants

- Using technology
- Importance of shared research agenda
- Establishing trust

Interactive skills

- Reassurance
- Listening
- Verbal expertise
- Explaining absence

Conducting ethical research online

A second challenge raised by Internet research is whether well established ethics codes are appropriate for work online.

This question is important because Internet research has certain distinctive features that may increase the challenge of acting ethically - features such as:

- the blurred distinction between public and private domains

- the ease of anonymity or pseudonymity
- the geographical dispersal of users
- the ability to record and archive communications without consent
- the ability to track participants using the technology

The presentation will focus on some key ethical debates:

The public-private debate

A key issue in Internet research is whether the online world is a 'public' or 'private' place – or in more sophisticated formulations 'private places in a public forum'. This links to a core question – who owns the words that appear online?

Causing harm in internet research debate

The ultimate question for internet research must be - what harm can it do? There seems no doubt that Internet research has risks; risks that are over and above those that researchers in conventional research have to consider. Areas of risk that will be discussed are:

Technical

Lack of security

Lack of privacy

Legal

Lack of understanding of legal responsibilities

Personal

Lack of:

protection from harassment, abuse and deception

debriefing possibilities

protection from exposure

knowledge about the potential for exposure

protection for the most vulnerable

RESOURCES FOR PROGRAMME PAGE

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Mann, C. and Stewart, F. (2001) 'Internet Interviewing' in Gubrium, J. and Holstein, J. (eds.) *Handbook of Interview Research*, (London, Thousand Oaks:Sage)

Mann, C and Stewart, F. (2000) Using the Internet in Qualitative Research: A Handbook for Researching Online. New Technologies for Social Research series. (London: Sage)