Internet Research ⑦

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Abstract

This chapter reviews salient characteristics of the internet to illustrate some of the ways internet-based media can influence the shape, scope, and direction of a study. This chapter suggests that substantial benefit can be gained by considering the methodological implications of these characteristics, whether one is using the internet as a tool for non-internet-related topics, studying social phenomena directly implicated by the internet, or studying the internet itself. Ethical considerations of internet research are also discussed.

The internet is a social phenomenon, a tool, and also a field site for qualitative research. Depending on the role the internet plays in the qualitative research project or how it is conceptualized by the researcher, different epistemological, logistical, and ethical considerations will come into play. The term 'Internet' originally described a network of computers that made possible the decentralized transmission of information. Now, the term serves as an umbrella for innumerable technologies, capacities, uses, and social spaces. Because the types of social interaction made possible by the internet vary so widely, qualitative researchers find it necessary to define the concept more narrowly within individual studies. This is complicated by the fact that the study of the internet cuts across all academic disciplines. There are no central methodological or theoretical guidelines and research findings are widely distributed and decentralized.

As the internet becomes more and more ubiquitous, it saturates literally every part of our civic, social, and professional lives, whether or not we even use the technologies themselves. In terms of qualitative inquiry, the internet does not simply provide new tools or venues for conducting social research, it challenges taken-for-granted frameworks for how identities, relationships, cultures, and social structures are constructed. Likewise, it challenges how we understand and conduct qualitative inquiry in an epoch of media convergence, mediated identities, redefinitions of social boundaries, and the transcendence of geographical boundaries (Baym & Markham, 2009).

Core methodological principles do not change, however, and this chapter maintains that successful navigation of these challenges by qualitative researchers relies on their ability not only to ask reflexive questions at critical junctures throughout the project, but also to 'remain grounded as the research contexts, technologies, and the very nature of their social worlds seem to change, converge, collide, or collapse' (Baym & Markham, 2009, p. ix).

The internet tends to be studied in one or more of the following ways:

The study of any social phenomenon using internet-based tools for collecting, sorting, storing, and/or analyzing information gathered:

Inquiry related to any topic might utilize various capacities and interfaces available via the internet to augment or replace traditional qualitative methods of collecting, storing, sorting, and analyzing information. The internet is also associated with the use of data analysis software, albeit inaccurately, as the internet is not strictly necessary to enable the functioning of such analytical tools.

The study of sociocultural phenomena that are mediated by, interwoven with, or rely on the internet for their composition or function:

Inquiry might focus on the way people use or experience various aspects of the internet, or on the cultural formations emerging from or made possible through the internet. Methods drawn from a wide range of disciplines can be adapted to studying internet use or internet-mediated environments.

The study of the internet or aspects of it as phenomena in themselves:

Inquiry might focus on the network, technologies, or capacities of the internet. This research scenario is distinguished from the previous the because of a greater focus on various features and implications of this globe spanning network of connectivity, rather than those social phenomena resulting from internet use.

These categorizations of inquiry are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Researchers studying an online community may conceptualize the internet simultaneously as a tool for collecting information, the fieldsite, and also an object of analysis. A

researcher mapping the way text messages flow through networks may use the internet as a tool for collecting data or measuring speed of transmission. At the same time, the researcher might explore the social impact of this mapping or examine the social life of the messages themselves as they travel beyond the individual.

As with any framework, these three frameworks guide and naturally restrict the researcher's general approach as well as specific practices. As the purpose of research is identified and the study unfolds, certain characteristics of the internet will become more meaningful than others. For example, Researcher 1, studying how breast cancer survivors frame their experiences, might conceptualize the internet as a tool, using various internet media to contact participants, schedule interviews, distribute open-ended question lists, collect research diaries, organise and sort data, and so forth. Researcher 2, studying how women feel about being members of a virtual breast cancer group, may conceptualize the internet as a field site, observing interaction practices and group norms among participants. Researcher 3, studying how frames of meaning surrounding breast cancer are negotiated and reproduced, might focus on the networked features of blogging, studying the hyperlinks between websites, mapping the network of connections created by repeated elements across multiple sites. In the first case, the information processing and transmitting features of the internet are salient, but only inasmuch as these tools function effectively. It is essential to consider how these tools are operating, but the internet itself or the internet-mediated aspects of sensemaking are not the subjects of study. In the second case, the internet-mediated characteristics of the group become salient if one is attempting to study the uniqueness of a 'virtual' community (as opposed to those that are physically based). In the third case, the networks of connections constitute the phenomenon; links between users are the primary focus.

These cases are oversimplified to demonstrate that one's definitional and conceptual framework for the internet will shift depending on one's ontological and epistemological premises, research goals, and the specific form of the research question. Rigorously analyzing the connections between one's questions, the subjects of inquiry, and the possible methods of collection, analysis, and interpretation is an essential part of all qualitative inquiry. In qualitative internet studies, reflecting on various characteristics of the internet is a crucial part of this iterative process. It helps the researcher create more internal theoretical consistency and also narrows the monumental range of choices for previous studies that might guide the current research project.

Below, I review some basic characteristics of the internet that might be salient to one's project. This list is not exhaustive but general, intended heuristically. These are characteristics that tend to cause problems for qualitative researchers, raise challenging questions about research methods, or create new opportunities for researchers. Reflecting on these characteristics with a specific case study in mind can help researchers make wise choices as they investigate potentially unfamiliar forms of

mediation, new technologies, or unique research environments. These characteristics can apply to almost any internet-mediated research context, regardless of the specific technologies involved.

Salient Characteristics of the Internet

The Internet as a Medium of Communication

As a medium for communication, the internet provides multiple means of interaction and performance of identity and community. Conceptualizing the internet as a medium allows us to see it in such ways as a conduit for the transmission of information from one place and person to another; a range of language aids for interacting with others; a tool for bundling up bits of information into a package that makes sense. The internet provides the means for creating, displaying, and framing the objects of study and the boundaries for experience. It is also a method for reaching out to participants or information.

Although composed of vast networks of connections between computers, the internet is more associated with the tangible capacities afforded by these instantaneous connections. Users focus less on the actual networks of connections than the communities made possible by these networks or the texts, still and moving images, and sounds facilitated by these networks. People use the internet in ways that parallel but depart from or extend earlier media for communication, such as letter writing, telephone, Post-it notes, bulletin boards, and so forth. People can use multiple media simultaneously, connecting to vast and complicated social and informational networks. One's use of the media can be asynchronous or synchronous; one-to-one, one-to-many, or many–many; anonymous or not. The presentation of self may be represented in writing, sound, moving and still images, live or pre-recorded video, avatars, various displayed artifacts, and so forth.

One should neither get bogged down in this nor dismiss it as commonplace, but reflect on what is being created when one uses the internet as a medium for communication, or when one is studying those sociocultural phenomena constituted via the internet. Use of a particular form of internet media may appear homogeneous at the surface level of behaviour when, in fact, there are as many motives and purposes as there are conversations. For example, the seemingly simple practice of sending text messages could be conceptualized variously as: a conversation continuer, a marker of presence, a sign of status, an opportunity to represent oneself authentically, a move of resistance, an opportunity to wear a mask, a location device, or a signal for unified action.

If used as a tool for research, the internet and it capabilities should be matched to the goals, topics, or participants of the project. Because internet technologies are

defined and adapted in distinctive ways by different users and groups, this is often an inductive process. Collecting life histories via email may be satisfactory, but allowing participants to create ongoing life history accounts on websites that they can design with color and images may yield richly textured results. Using photo or video blogging would yield yet a different outcome for analysis. For an interview study, real-time text-based interfaces may provide anonymous participation and spontaneous conversation, but that may be inadequate for certain participants or research questions. Interviewing via videoconferencing may be preferred by some participants, but others might provide more information if they also had an instant messaging window open; sometimes people can not vocalize something face to face, but can and will express it in text. Email interviews may be better suited to participants who have busy schedules or desire time to consider their responses, but may be unsuitable for users more familiar with shorter snippet forms of interaction.

It is essential to consider the various ways in which people use and make sense of the internet as a communication medium, because sensemaking practices differ widely. One might make sense of it as a tool, focusing on the ability of the internet to make information seeking and retrieval more efficient and effective. Another might perceive the internet as a place, focusing on the cultural boundaries created by interactions rather than on the channel for communication. These different perceptions can influence greatly the way people utilize and talk about the internet. One must also consider the skill of participants: obviously, certain media are second nature to some users while for others these tools are completely foreign. This does not mean a researcher should adopt or dismiss certain media without due consideration of the value of the tool in relation to the research questions and the goal of research.

A final point to consider in this section is the extent to which the researcher's own perceptions about what the internet is will influence the way he or she observes and interprets in internet-based contexts. Being aware of the distinctions can help one better understand and adapt. One key is making a conscious analysis in order to best match the media of communication to the context, the user's preferences, and the research question. Another key is ascertaining, to the extent possible, how the subjects themselves frame their communicative behaviors.

Internet as Geographically Dispersed

Internet interfaces disregard location and distance, enabling the instantaneous and inexpensive transmission of information between people and databases. This capacity of the internet is generally taken for granted in everyday communication with others. Logistically, the distance-collapsing capacity of the internet allows researchers to connect to participants around the globe. This increases and/or alters the available pool of participants and can enable questions and comparisons that were previously less available.

Research can be designed around questions of interaction and social behavior unbound from the restrictions of proximity or geography. Participants can be selected on the basis of their appropriate fit within the research questions rather than their physical location or convenience to the researcher. Hine (2000) argues that the ethnographer's notion of cultural boundary must be reconsidered given this capacity of the internet. Rather than relying on traditional, geographically based means of encapsulating the culture under study, such as national boundaries or town limits, ethnographers might find more accuracy in using discourse patterns to find boundaries.

It is suggested that qualitative researchers carefully consider the ways in which unlimited reach complicates the research project, particularly regarding the size of one's data sets and cross-cultural issues. Internet researchers have found themselves daunted by enormous data sets, collected simply because internet technologies make archiving easy. This can frustrate researchers who find it impossible to analyze from any traditional qualitative methods. Although computer-aided analytical tools have grown in sophistication, their use should be balanced against the premise that qualitative approaches are uniquely developed and best suited to inductive, close analysis and depth of understanding. This is often at odds with the broad view encouraged by large pools of data. In addition, globally situated subjects reveal multitudes of cultural differences in assumptions, approaches, and sensemaking practices. Qualitative researchers have long grappled with cultural differences, but the fact that internet technologies bring the data to us – rather than the other way around – tends to hide what might have been much more obvious to scholars situated in cultures foreign to themselves.

Finally, geographic dispersion should not be equated with global reach or global research. Although the term 'global' might imply a planet-wide field site for research or the application of universal principles in the interpretation of social behavior, social problems and interactions themselves always occur at the local level. This is where qualitative research remains strongest. The term 'global' gains more usability when applied as a guide for one's sensibilities, rather than for one's scope (Markham, 2009, p. 39). This is particularly meaningful when one realizes that even if geographic dispersion is made possible by the internet, it does not mean our pool is equally dispersed; our research sites and subjects are in all likelihood still determined by our own networks.

Internet as Anonymous

Certain interaction environments facilitate actual or perceived anonymity. This has obvious advantages for certain topics or methods of qualitative inquiry. Part of this perception is facilitated by the internet's disconnection from geographic markers,

which means that one's participation in interaction with other people is not necessarily linked to one's physical proximity to others, as would be the case in all face-to-face contexts.

As well as the natural – though not necessary – separation between people interacting via internet-mediated communication, certain interfaces are designed to promote and protect anonymity. These anonymous interaction environments may allow participants to speak more freely without restraints brought about by social norms, mores, and conventions. This feature is useful in studies of risky or deviant behaviors or socially unacceptable attitudes.

Johnson (2003) explores the way the 'pro-anorexia' movement was born and evolved online. Rather than talking face to face with participants, she examined their discursive practices in websites they had created. The infrastructure of the internet allows pro-anorexics to express their ideas and values without censure and without connection to their actual identities. They may have provided this information to the researcher in focus groups or in interviews, but because of the stigmatized nature of this eating disorder, Johnson's task as a researcher would have been much more difficult; in this case, she was able to access over 500 sites.

Bromseth (2002) studied the sensemaking practices of Norwegians exploring lesbianism and bisexuality. Again, although she could have obtained this data in face-to-face settings, it was unlikely that she would have obtained such a rich and diverse sample. The population of Norway is very small and therefore residents may feel less anonymous in general (Bromseth, 2002). Within a culture of heterosexual normativity, the likelihood of involving face-to-face participants in the manner Bromseth achieved via the internet is unlikely.

Anonymity and geographic distance both complicate and ease ethical considerations. In meeting the ethical requirements for conducting research involving human subjects in most countries, it is required, among other things, to gain informed consent. It is difficult if not impossible in an anonymous environment to ascertain if the user is capable of granting informed consent. The physical and legal markers traditionally available to qualitative researchers in the field are obviously absent if the participant wishes to remain bodiless, nameless, and faceless in an online context. This has raised the question of whether our regulations associated with informed consent are appropriately designed to protect human subjects. Using the internet as a method of interacting with participants may actually facilitate protection of human subjects; the participant has many outlets to withdraw from the study and certain interaction environments can improve the likelihood of maintaining confidentiality.

Viewed from another perspective, however, anonymity is not guaranteed in any internet context, which makes this a double-edged sword for the researcher. Even if one is ostensibly studying publicly accessible texts, the potential harm to real people should be considered carefully and thoroughly. Any study of social interaction via internet technologies involves real people, whose privacy concerns may be

quite different from what the researcher presumes. Not only should researchers understand internet research ethics guidelines and principles by keeping up with current trends and debates, but they should also make their own ethical decision making clear in the research report. This topic has been addressed in many arenas and there are no simple answers or formulas to follow. Recommended readings are provided at the end of this chapter.

As an interpretive rather than legalistic issue, anonymity can be discomfiting for researchers who may not know who the participant is, at least in any embodied, tangible way. This raises concerns about 'authenticity,' which has been a sticking point for many internet researchers and remains a dubious concept in general. On one hand, interacting with participants in anonymous environments results in the loss of many of the interactional qualities taken for granted in face-to-face interviews and observations. This may constitute a meaningful gap of information for the researcher who relies on these qualities as a way of knowing. On the other hand, authenticity is questionable in any setting, online or offline. Identical gaps of information occur in more traditional research and interaction environments, but are generally considered to be more a problem of interpretive clarity than a natural condition of doing research with unfamiliar participants. Solutions to these research situations, if one insists on searching for authenticity, require pragmatic sensitivity to all the details of the situation in which one is conducting research. In internet-mediated environments, however, the concept may not be meaningful at all, in that the researcher is attending to the textuality of individuals.
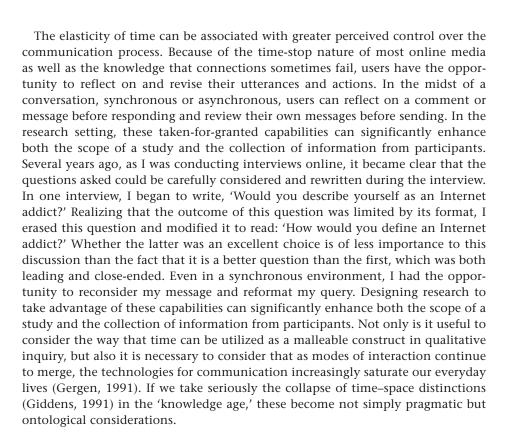
Internet as Chrono Malleable

As well as collapsing distance, internet technologies can disrupt the traditional uses and concepts of time in interaction. Because internet technologies accommodate both asynchronous and synchronous communication between individuals and groups, the use of time can be more individually determined. In real-time conversations, users can see their messages before they are sent. Backspacing and editing are made possible by stopping time in this way. In text-based environments, pauses and gaps are expected. Users may be participating in multiple conversations or tasks at once. Users may experience different speeds of connection or interruptions in service. In asynchronous media such as email, forum discussions, social media updates or blog postings, these pauses can be quite long, perhaps even weeks or months. In synchronous audio/visual contexts as well, users not only work around but also expect disjunctive and fragmented interactions.

The chrono-malleable features of internet-mediated communication can assist researchers in conducting interviews, for example. Complications regarding venue, commuting, and scheduling conflicts are less restrictive when interactions occur on the internet.

The elasticity of time can be associated with greater perceived control over the communication process. Because of the time-stop nature of most online media as well as the knowledge that connections sometimes fail, users have the opportunity to reflect on and revise their utterances and actions. In the midst of a conversation, synchronous or asynchronous, users can reflect on a comment or message before responding and review their own messages before sending. In the research setting, these taken-for-granted capabilities can significantly enhance both the scope of a study and the collection of information from participants. Several years ago, as I was conducting interviews online, it became clear that the questions asked could be carefully considered and rewritten during the interview. In one interview, I began to write, 'Would you describe yourself as an Internet addict?' Realizing that the outcome of this question was limited by its format, I erased this question and modified it to read: 'How would you define an Internet addict?' Whether the latter was an excellent choice is of less importance to this discussion than the fact that it is a better question than the first, which was both leading and close-ended. Even in a synchronous environment, I had the opportunity to reconsider my message and reformat my query. Designing research to take advantage of these capabilities can significantly enhance both the scope of a study and the collection of information from participants. Not only is it useful to consider the way that time can be utilized as a malleable construct in qualitative inquiry, but also it is necessary to consider that as modes of interaction continue to merge, the technologies for communication increasingly saturate our everyday lives (Gergen, 1991). If we take seriously the collapse of time–space distinctions (Giddens, 1991) in the 'knowledge age,' these become not simply pragmatic but ontological considerations.

Internet as Multi-modal

Communication via the internet occurs in multiple modes, alternately or simultaneously. Whether sponsored by software and hardware, a person's individual use, or the emergence of dyadic or group norms over time, these multiple modes operate on the sense making practices of users. Consequently, the issue of the internet as multi-modal becomes meaningful when designing or capturing interactions in the research context.

Users generally employ more than one internet-based modality at once; a user might be sending status updates to his or her social network, playing interactive games with friends, downloading music, updating his or her blog, and watching streaming video. When instant messages pop up on the screen, he or she is prompted to type a reply within a new or continued conversation.

Much more than mere technical accomplishments, these activities can be seen as adaptive, evolving means of constituting and maintaining networked identities

in a media-saturated environment. These can be studied as phenomena or used as tools to augment the ways that researchers engage and communicate with participants. For example, researchers can use one channel with a group and different 'back channels' with individuals to interact privately while the larger group activity is occurring. These non-disruptive 'whispers' can add valuable data that might not otherwise be captured in the moment.

Certain environments are set up to facilitate multiple simultaneous modes of interaction, such as interactive gaming, virtual classrooms, and other social networking systems. Even in straightforward information transmission environments, which were not designed to facilitate a sense of presence, programs can evolve into shared spaces as the meanings, relationships, and communities created by the interactions transcend the limitations of the programs in which people are interacting.

During an online focus group discussion conducted by the author, participants used multiple technologies simultaneously in ways that complicated data collection but facilitated in-depth participation levels. The environment allowed for pseudonymous real-time participation among the group. Each person's comment would be posted as soon as he or she clicked the send or enter button. Messages scrolled up the screen as the conversation progressed. In one session, two participants who had previously been active contributors were not talking as actively as others were. Because of the programmed environment we were using, I was able to send one of them a request to talk privately, which, when accepted, opened a new screen that appeared only on our two desktops, in which we chatted privately. The participant told me that she and the other non-talkative participant had actually been chatting, as we were, in a private room, discussing one of the group's earlier issues in depth.

My discussion with this participant was similar to whispering during a group conversation, except that exchanges in the larger group were not disrupted. Her private chat with another participant was also an extended side conversation, one that added valuable data and could not have occurred unobtrusively in a physically present focus group setting. Of course, the data must be captured and archived, which requires that participants be well informed enough to realize this and tell the researcher that they are producing valuable information when they engage in these whispered – and private from the researcher – conversations.

In another instance, when a participant appeared to stop participating, I found out, using this same technique, that the participant had been offended by an earlier comment made by another participant. He stated that he was no longer certain that his contributions to the conversation were desired, and that perhaps he should withdraw from the study. By talking with him about this in a private, online discussion, I was able to convince him that the offending comment was not directed at him, and that his contributions were valuable. Certainly, this could have happened in the course of a physically located focus group, but our private sideline conversation defused the situation, eased the participant's misgivings, and allowed the larger

group conversation to continue while we were sorting this out. The participant re-entered the conversation and later told me he talked about the offending comment with the person who wrote it, with positive results. These examples illustrate how a researcher can take advantage of multi-modal features of internet media, using a wide range of technologies.

Whether the technology provides the multiple modes or the users adapt technologies to a multi-modal way of thinking is less important than the fact that these characteristics can influence the way users perceive contexts and interact with one another. For researchers, this has great potential for augmenting traditional approaches and creating previously impossible methods of interacting with participants.

Internet as a Context of Social Construction

As I write this chapter, various programs on my computer and my smart phone collaborate to present a snapshot of not only my world, but also my understanding of *the* world. I filter news, I follow links sent by friends, and I follow random or not-so-random paths of information to build my knowledge of the world. I scan and contribute to various social networks. Each context is unique, each post authored by a slightly different version of 'me' and targeted to slightly different audiences. I am a cook posting new recipes. I am a photographer. I could be a methodologist, but I could also be a birdwatcher, a player of multiplayer online games, a dominatrix in an avatar-based social space, or a microcelebrity, known for my acerbic reviews of YouTube viral videos or my roles in amateur porn video. I could have a team of ghostwriters enacting my identity through Twitter if I were important enough.

For many, this is everyday life in the twenty-first century. Of course, the saturated, multiphrenic self (Gergen, 1991) emerged well before the internet. But the extent to which our identities are saturated with media, networked with others, and intermingled with information and communication technologies is a recent phenomenon, one worthy of study and reflection. This is not just a sociological issue, but a methodological issue, as 'the sociological subject is powerful, shifting, and in terms of qualitative research design, confusing. Our research models do not fit the multiphrenic subject very well' (Baym & Markham, 2009, p. x).

The internet comprises discursive forms of presentation and interaction that can be observed immediately and archived. This capacity facilitates the researcher's ability to witness and analyze the structure of talk, the negotiation of meaning and identity, the development of relationships and communities, and the construction of social structures as these occur discursively. Linguistic and social structures emerging through social interaction via the internet provide the opportunity for researchers to track and analyze how language builds and sustains social reality.

The internet is not novel in that individual use, habitual practice across groups, and technical capacities constitute patterns of temporal interactions, building social structures that may become concrete realities. These processes describe any language system. The internet is unique, however, in that it leaves visible traces of these processes. Internet technologies allow the researcher to see the visible artifacts of this negotiation process in forms divorced from both the source and the intended or actual audience. This can give researchers a means of studying the way social realities are displayed or how these might be negotiated over time.

Ethical Considerations in the Post-Google Era

The internet is often chosen as a method of collecting information because of the ease with which researchers can gain access to groups, download texts, capture conversations, observe individual and group behaviors, or interact with participants in the field. The ethics associated with internet research are complicated and, because researchers come from all disciplines and norms for research practices, hotly contested. It is crucial to be aware of the basic ethical issues involved in internet research, to make ethical decisions throughout the project, and to articulate one's ethical choices in written reports, so future generations of scholars can learn from one's decisions and so that reviewers and readers can be assured that ethical practices were followed.

Although all issues cannot be covered in this chapter, ethical challenges and controversy tend to arise in the following circumstances:

- Many users perceive publicly accessible discourse sites as private. For example, although many online discussion groups appear to be public, members may perceive their interaction to be private and can be surprised or angered by intruding researchers. Other groups know their communication is public but nonetheless do not want to be studied. Researchers must be aware of not only the obvious parameters of the site, but also the non-obvious perceptions and attitudes of the participants in these sites. This has proven to be very complicated for many researchers (for extensive discussion of these issues, see Gajjala, 2002; Markham & Baym, 2009, Sveningsson, 2004).
- Anonymity is difficult to guarantee. For example, some users have a writing style that is readily identifiable in their online community, so that the researcher's use of a pseudonym does not guarantee anonymity. Also, search engines are often capable of finding statements used in published qualitative research reports. The potential harm to individuals, relationships, families, and careers is not to be dismissed lightly. Many researchers have come up with innovative solutions to this dilemma (see Ess and the AoIR Ethics Working Committee, 2002).

- Online discussion sites can be highly transient. For example, researchers gaining access permission in June may not be studying the same population in July. Therefore, while a researcher may have gained consent from a group at one moment, this consent may not apply at later points in time.
- Vulnerable persons are difficult to identify in certain online environments. For example, age is difficult if not impossible to verify in certain online environments (see for example Stern, 2003, for more discussion of studying youth online).

Ethical guidelines and stances vary by person, institution, and country. It should be noted that many current regulations were not designed for internet research scenarios and therefore remain inadequate. For example, while 'informed consent' is an often required protection for human subjects, it is not always possible or warranted to obtain in the way intended by regulators. What if the participant is adamant that they use only his or her online identity? It is then impossible to determine if the participant is capable of giving informed consent (incapable typically refers to underage or mentally challenged). As another example, internet texts are often defined by researchers as public texts, not human subjects. Yet if the author of those texts believes they constitute an extension of the self or an independent online identity, are they subject to the same ethical protection as physical human subjects?

These are not easily answered questions. Given the variations in ethical stances as well as the diversity of methodological choices, each researcher must explore and define research within his or her own integral frameworks while also following 'best practice' guidelines. This is a task best accomplished by being well versed in contemporary ethical issues and debates. Comprehending and critically evaluating the broader discussions about ethics is essential, not only those discussions within internet studies or within disciplines, but those within communities of qualitative researchers. An extensive reaching list of case studies, arguments, and best practice documents is recommended at the end of this chapter.

Asking the Right Questions

Research environments utilizing various internet media must undergo careful evaluation, as each decision one makes throughout the course of a research project makes a difference. Testing various mediated environments and reflecting on the associated characteristics can help one discern which might be most suitable for the particular participants or research questions. Evaluating the research environment is not just a matter of looking at the tools and technologies but also reflexively interrogating the self as a researcher, to understand one's own assumptions and habitual practices.

Reflection and adaptation are necessary as one integrates internet communication technologies into qualitative research design. Adapting to the internet is one level of reflexivity; as we use new media for communication, the interactional challenges and opportunities can teach us about how to use these methods. Adjusting to the individual is another level; as in face-to-face contexts, a skilled researcher will pay close attention to participant conceptualization and utilization of the medium for communication. Without having access to physically embodied non-verbal features of interaction, the researcher conducting internet-based interviews may want to address deliberately these concerns with the participants so they may aid in the interpretation of discourse. Remaining methodologically agile is yet another level of reflexivity, particularly as our networked selves and social forms do not appear to be getting any less complex.

It is best to remain context sensitive, constantly engaged in self-reflexive analysis, and open to adaptation. If researchers cannot adjust to the particular features and capacities of internet technologies, they may miss the opportunity to understand these phenomena as they operate in context. As Gergen (1991) notes, if we are to survive, flexible adaptation and improvisation will become our norm. The shape of this improvisation varies with each project and scholar, yet the basic principles remain the same: To manage the dizzying array of contingencies in ever-changing internet contexts is to remain solidly grounded in the core practices and principles of social inquiry. Good qualitative research takes time, trial, and error, regardless of how easy and swift the technologies seem or how quickly research papers seem to flood the market after the release of some new technology. In internet related research environments, when everything may seem up for grabs, quality derives from asking the right questions, a process that begins by asking a lot of questions.

Summary and Future Prospects

Qualitative study of the internet is likely to continue to shift and change as new technologies and capacities tempt researchers to explore or reinvent methodological approaches to internet-related interactions. Although innovation is encouraged where necessary, the underlying foundations of qualitative research remain. An adroit researcher will deal with the seemingly constant changes in technologies by remaining grounded and inductive. This chapter offers an overview of characteristics associated with the internet-mediated social contexts as a guide to this end. Focusing on these or other salient characteristics can help the researcher focus on associated ethical and practical issues and can also help guide a researcher's search into previous studies for crucial grounding.

Research in this arena is often considered to be on the 'cutting edge' because it involves research of novel capacities for communication. Researchers from all disciplines flock to this area of research, bringing myriad theories, methods,

and techniques. As technologies continue to converge, we will find that research practices related to internet technologies influence not only internet researchers, but also the entire academic community. In this hyped environment of novelty, mixed methods, and varying levels of quality, it is evermore crucial to remain solidly grounded and knowledgeable in a range of qualitative approaches.

Discussion Questions

- Given each of the salient characteristics of the internet described above, what might be some key concerns for different types of qualitative methods, such as ethnography? Discourse analysis? Case study research?
- How might qualitative internet researchers have to deal with ethical issues at a different level from journalists? Why would there be a difference?
- In what ways are internet-based contexts advantageous to physical contexts? In what way are they disadvantageous?

Recommended Reading

For overviews of ethical issues in internet studies, the following resources are recommended: Ess and The Association of Internet Researchers' 'Ethical decision-making and Internet research' (2002); Frankel and Siang's 'Ethical and legal aspects of human subjects research on the Internet' (1999); Elizabeth Buchanan's edited collection *Readings in virtual research ethics* (2004); May Thorseths's *Applied ethics in Internet research* (2003); and McKee & Porter's *The ethics of Internet research* (2009). Also strongly recommended is the Internet Research Ethics Commons, a web resource that not only provides resources and overviews of trends and codes of practice, but access to blogs and discussion forums devoted to the discussion of specific cases and issues: http://www.internetresearchethics.org/

For in depth information on various methodological issues and strategies relating to qualitative internet research, the following edited collections are recommended: Mark Johns et. al., *Online Social Research: Methods, Issues, and Ethics* (2004); Christine Hine's *Virtual Methods* (2005); and Annette Markham & Nancy Baym's *Internet inquiry: Dialogue among scholars* (2009).

For book-length qualitative analyses of the internet from a range of perspectives, the following titles are recommended: Nancy Baym's *Tune In, Log On* (2000); Lori Kendall's *Hanging Out in the Virtual Pub* (2002); Christine Hine's *Virtual ethnography* (2001); Annette Markham's *Life online* (1998); Miller and Slater's *The Internet: An ethnographic approach* (2000); and Shani Orgad's *Storytelling Online* (2005).

References

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