

# Introduction

Online research methods are increasingly being taught on mainstream courses, particularly to Social Science students at masters and doctoral level. This often builds on the experiences of researchers who have used online research for quantitative surveys and questionnaires through tools such as email, websites and software packages. However researchers are now increasingly using the Internet as a vehicle for qualitative online research. In this they are adapting a range of familiar qualitative research methods tools, such as different types of interviews and diaries, to engage with participants across different time zones and places at times convenient to them without the considerable costs involved in travelling. This innovative approach remains at present theoretically underdeveloped.

This book considers the merits and complexities of using these qualitative research tools online to conduct online synchronous (real time) interviews and asynchronous (non-real time) interviews. Central to this is the question of how researchers can construct trustworthy knowledge that is of benefit to the readers of it. It leads to the consideration not only of epistemology – the construction and verification of knowledge through the means by which it is collected and analysed – but also to how that knowledge can be collected ethically. As in all qualitative research a key element is the relationships which researchers build up with their willing participants.

The authors examine critically the ethical, methodological and epistemological challenges that face researchers who carry out different types of online qualitative synchronous and asynchronous interviews. They do this by:

- Reviewing the epistemological issues surrounding online qualitative research, with specific focus on different approaches to online interviewing.
- Examining the methodological complexities involved in designing and conducting online interviews in qualitative research. Their value as a research tool is also considered in the light of both the similarities and differences compared with onsite interviews.
- Considering the ethical implications of, and flows of inequalities and power that occur in online interviewing.
- Exploring the theoretical and epistemological challenges surrounding the collection and analysis of data in online interviews.

To achieve these aims the book draws on a broad range of international research studies that have used online qualitative interviewing to show researchers the methodological and theoretical considerations associated with this approach, supported by vignettes of practice to illustrate these.

These discussions are intended to stimulate ongoing debate about these research approaches, particularly when compared with onsite qualitative interviews. By onsite the authors refer to those methods which are not conducted in the virtual environment but in particular face-to-face interviews. Through this examination, the authors highlight the need for researchers to consider a range of methodological issues before deciding whether online qualitative interviews are appropriate for the topics they want to investigate.

It is anticipated that the book will be suitable as both a core and supplementary text for those undertaking postgraduate research methods courses across the social sciences at postgraduate level. Although the text is primarily designed for this, it is also expected to appeal to professional researchers who need to understand the methodological and epistemological challenges of carrying out online interviews in the virtual environment, as well as the new ethical issues that researchers are faced with. So it assumes that readers will have some familiarity with many of the issues associated with qualitative interviewing.

The book provides a well-reasoned introduction to the challenges of online qualitative research especially as enacted the different types of interviews. It is not intended as a 'how to do it book' but it does offer researchers a variety of practical advice in each chapter. However it is intended to encourage researchers to engage with the critical practical and theoretical issues that must be considered in the conduct of online qualitative interviews

The book is structured into 10 chapters each dealing with different ethical, methodological and practical issues surrounding the conduct of online qualitative research. Chapter 1 introduces the aims of the book. In doing so, it explores how the advent of the Internet has inspired new ways of thinking about the nature of qualitative inquiry and how research is conducted using different methods of data collection. It takes up the theoretical concerns about how knowledge is constructed in qualitative research and the potential this holds for online interviewing. The chapter concludes by providing an overview of the chapters to follow.

Chapter 2 examines how knowledge is constructed and accessed in online environments. It investigates the nature of online relationships and communication, in both naturalistic and constructed research settings. It examines different approaches to online communication in terms of asynchronicity and synchronicity and the nature of interactions that emerge (reflexive and spontaneous) between researcher and participant. It discusses the implications this has for collecting online interview data as researchers try to make sense of their participants' social worlds and sustain meaningful research relationships with them online.

Chapter 3 examines qualitative methodologies and methods that have used online communications as a platform for collecting data from individuals. It also considers the opportunities for developing and understanding online research practices. This includes discussion of the conduct of virtual ethnographies.

It considers the value of combining online/virtual and offline/real interactions with research participants, and the methodological implications this has for online research.

Chapter 4 looks at the impact of the displacement of time and space in online research, especially through interviewing, and the implications this has for research participants. It considers how knowledge is constructed in a disembodied, anonymous and textual environment. It discusses how such an environment affects research relationships when visual and verbal cues are absent. It also examines approaches to interviewing when conducted asynchronously and in real-time.

Chapter 5 examines a range of ethical issues that confront the qualitative online researcher. It considers how ethical principles associated with onsite interviews can be translated for qualitative online research, especially when collecting sensitive and personal information. The main issues are the construction of informed consent in order for researchers to gain ethical access to research sites, the construction of trustworthy data, and the protection of participants from harm by guaranteeing the confidentiality, privacy and security of their data. The last is bound up with the complexities of delineating public and private online spaces. An element of this is the application of netiquette. It is not possible to consider such issues without discussing the impact of cross-cultural studies on the ethics of research.

Chapter 6 explores the credibility and authenticity of data when gathered using online interviews. It discusses the implications of textual self-presentation for assuring the authenticity of research projects, and what leads researchers to accept participants' statements of identity at face value when they lack the information provided in face-to-face encounters. It also examines the debates around combining online and offline research and whether by doing so, it is possible to get closer to social reality as a means of enhancing the rigour of the constructed method and the credibility of the data.

Chapter 7 examines the impact on research projects of the power relations and inequalities that exist between researchers and participants. In particular, it examines how, in the faceless context of the Internet, individuals assert and protect their agency and identity from positions of remoteness. This includes considering the impact of new technologies and the cultures associated with them on social processes, such as processes of work and the construction of people's identities and the cultural and political environments in which people work. The inherent inequalities of power in research projects have important implications for how researchers construct their online interviews, and the ways in which researchers have to approach and work with potential online participants in their studies.

Chapter 8 focuses on interrogating meanings in the third spaces of online qualitative research (both synchronous and asynchronous interviews). It begins by considering how such spaces lead to the negotiation of cultural hybridity and the construction of small cultures by researchers and other participants

engaged in the text/speech acts of online exchanges. In turn this leads firstly to consideration of the nature of the cultures of online research communities. Second, it leads to a discussion of the analysis of online discourses that are constructed in these disembodied third spaces.

Chapter 9 considers the contradiction of gathering public data for socially beneficially research while protecting the private lives of project participants. It considers general frameworks for curating data which shape how online researchers organise, store, analyse and distribute qualitative interview data. It also examines how issues related to the publication and dissemination of research outcomes contribute to the dilemmas in deciding what is public and private data when research is conducted online.

Chapter 10 draws together the book and reflects on the many challenges and possibilities that the Internet presents to researchers when they attempt to carry out online interviews for research purposes. In particular it considers the practical implications raised, and how researchers can surmount the epistemological and methodological challenges and opportunities that face them in constructing online research methods, such as interviews. It discusses how online researchers can cope with the ethical and political processes which surround them, and how they can surmount the cultural and personal conundrums of creating trustworthy online conversations. The chapter concludes by considering how to construct collaborative online research cultures that will facilitate participants' engagement in online research projects or research projects that use online methods.