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Internet-based Interviewing

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on Internet-based interviewing. The chapter begins with a short introduction debating the affordances and shortcomings of Internet-based interviewing, particularly in relation to face-to-face interviewing. In the second section, the different types of online interview will be discussed, using the framework of asynchronous and synchronous interviews. Each of these will be exemplified with case study examples from leaders in the field, as indicators of best practice. In the third and fourth sections issues of recruitment and interview design will be explored and elaborated. This is followed by a short discussion of the ethical issues involved in online interviewing. Key practical suggestions of the types and forms of software used for online interviews are then outlined in a technical guide. The final section finishes with some conclusions in which the potentials and limitations of online interviews are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Online research methods provide great methodological potential and versatility for research in all fields of social science. Use of these methods mitigates the distance of space, enables research to be easily internationalised without the usual associated travel costs and can be valuable for researchers contacting groups or individuals who may otherwise be difficult to reach, such as the less physically mobile. As such, online research methods are becoming more established as a legitimate means of data collection for social scientists, removing some of the 'considerable anxiety about just how far existing tried and tested research methods are appropriate for technologically mediated interactions' (Hine, 2005: 1). Indeed, as Dillman (2007: 447) comments, over the last decade there has been a 'quick evolution of web surveys from novel idea to routine use'. It is not just online surveys that have flourished; other online methods, such as e-mail interviews, have also moved into the mainstream over the last ten years. However, online synchronous interviewing remains a relatively novel and innovative approach to virtual data collection.

This chapter provides an overview of online or Internet-based interviewing. It begins by examining the use of asynchronous and synchronous online interviews. The chapter goes on to debate some of the advantages and limitations of online interviewing, particularly in relation to face-to-face traditional

interviewing. A brief discussion of key ethical concerns, such as informed consent, is then provided. A more practical section follows, which focuses on issues such as interview design and advises on appropriate software for the conduct of online interviewing. Finally, we conclude by drawing out some of the future prospects, potentials, omissions and limitations of online interviews.

ONLINE INTERVIEWS

The use of online research methods in social science research has become more widespread over the last decade (Hine, 2004). Such methods have included online surveys and questionnaires (Coomber, 1997; Smith, 1997; Bosnjak and Tuten, 2001; Best and Krueger, 2004; Dillman, 2007), virtual ethnographies (Hine, 2000), online asynchronous interviews (Bampton and Cowton, 2002; Orgad, 2005, 2006; James and Busher, 2006), and online synchronous interviews (Gaiser, 1997; Chen and Hinton, 1999; Mann and Stewart, 1999; O'Connor and Madge, 2001). The following section of the chapter examines the use of both synchronous and asynchronous online interviews in social research (see Table 15.1). We begin by exploring the asynchronous interview.

Asynchronous interviews

Online interviews, conducted in non-real time, or asynchronously, are increasingly being used as a data collection method by social scientists. There is a growing number of examples of research carried out using asynchronous interviews, most often facilitated via e-mail (see for example: Illingworth 2001, 2006; Mann and Stewart, 2000; Bampton and Cowton, 2002; Kivits, 2004, 2005; James and Busher, 2006). Indeed, interviews conducted through the use of e-mail have been one of the most widely used Internet-mediated methodologies to date.

The format of an e-mail interview is that the researcher, having obtained e-mail addresses and agreed participation from all respondents, sends out an e-mail which contains the interview questions, either in the body of the e-mail or as a word processor document attachment to the e-mail. The participant is invited to respond to the interview questions, either in the body of the e-mail or in a word-processed document, and is asked to return the completed answers to the researcher. Often the interview will take place over a period of time and questions are sent in stages, so that the interviewee is not overwhelmed with a long list of questions at the start of the process. The design of the interview script in terms of question order and question 'delivery' is central to the success of this approach. The e-mail interviewer must decide the best way to introduce the interview, the interview process and how best to deliver the interview questions; whether to send the interviewee all the interview questions in the first e-mail or to ask only one or two questions in the first e-mail and to stagger the other questions over time and over e-mails. The latter option runs the risk of respondents dropping out at an early stage and not responding to later questions, and the former may be off-putting owing to the initial number of questions (Bampton and Cowton, 2002).

There are a number of advantages to using an asynchronous online interview. In terms of technological requirements an e-mail interview is arguably one of the simplest modes of online interaction to set up as individuals become increasingly techno-competent. However, it is important to remember that for some individuals techno-competence may be inhibited by disabilities such as dyslexia or visual impairment (Clark, 2007), or other physical limitations which may make computer use difficult. However, Bowker and Tuffin (2004: 230) suggest quite the opposite, arguing that: 'The flexibility surrounding online data gathering may aid participation for those with disabilities. Indeed, irrespective of physical coordination, mobility and speech capacity, the textual nature of online interaction affords people with diverse operating techniques the capacity to participate.'

A distinct advantage of the e-mail interview is that interviewees can answer the interview

Table 15.1 A comparison of the characteristics of offline and online interviews

	Asynchronous online interview	*Synchronous online interview*	*Onsite face-to-face interview*	*Telephone interview*	*VOI interview*
Venue	E-mail and discussion board	Chatroom or conferencing site	Onsite venue	Telephone provider	VOI provider
Temporal restrictions	Non-real time	Real time	Real time	Real time	Real time
Limitations	No time constraints	Constrained by time	Constrained by time	Constrained by time	Constrained by time
Software requirements	Simple, familiar	More complex	n/a	n/a	More complex
Technical ability	Low	Medium	n/a	n/a	Medium
Speed of response	Time to reflect included	Spontaneous	Spontaneous	Spontaneous	Spontaneous
Format of response	Written	Written	Oral and non-visual clues	Oral	Oral and potential for visual clues
Disadvantages	Easy to ignore or delete	Technical issues	Cost	Technical issues	Technical issues
Transcription	Generated automatically	Generated automatically	Not generated	Not generated	Not generated
Cost	Low cost	Low cost	Higher cost	Higher cost	Low cost

questions entirely at their own convenience. There are no time restrictions, and this can be particularly valuable when participants are located in different time zones. The lack of temporal restrictions also enables both the interviewer and interviewee to spend time considering their questions and answers, and perhaps composing, recomposing and editing responses to questions. However, e-mail interviews can also be used to construct an 'almost instantaneous dialogue between researcher and subject … if desired' (Selwyn and Robson, 1998: 2). Responses can be immediate and a relatively fast-paced exchange of questions and responses can be achieved.

Nevertheless, James and Busher (2006: 417) suggest that an advantage of e-mail interviews is that there is no need for the exchange to be fast-paced. They stress that much of the value of e-mail interviews lies in the opportunity for respondents to think about their responses, 'drafting and redrafting what they wanted to write' (p. 406). Indeed, they conclude by suggesting that e-mail interviews are particularly suitable when 'snappy answers are not required'. This is an argument with which we take issue. E-mail interviews do allow respondents considerable time to compose, edit and redraft responses to questions. This possibility, whilst framed as an advantage by advocates of the e-mail interview (Hewson et al, 2003; Kivits, 2005; James and Busher, 2006), could, however, equally be perceived as a disadvantage. A response which has been so well considered and carefully thought about is likely to produce a 'socially desirable' answer, rather than a more spontaneous response which can be generated through synchronous interviews or by more traditional face-to-face interviews (Joinson, 2005).

Some of the advantages of e-mail interviewing can then also represent disadvantages. For example, whilst technologically an e-mail interview may be simple to set up and administer, it is also easy for a respondent to ignore or delete e-mails if s/he is too busy or loses interest in the process. The frequent time lag between an interviewer posting a question and the interviewee e-mailing a reply can result in a certain level of spontaneity being lost, and this may impact on the richness of the data generated. Sanders (2005: 75–76)

compared the data gathered via e-mail interviews to that collected in face-to-face interviews, using the same structure and questions, and found that the e-mail interviews did not generate the same quality of data. She argues that:

> … the essence of the inquiry was often misunderstood or answers would diverge to other subjects. It was difficult to maintain the flow of dialogue … and because of the asynchronous nature of e-mail contact, the lack of spontaneity meant that it was difficult to probe and threads were easily lost.

E-mail exchanges are not the only means of facilitating an online asynchronous interview. Gaiser (1997), for example, carried out online asynchronous focus group interviews in a listserv environment, whilst Ward (1999) posted interview questions periodically on a well-used bulletin board and users posted their responses to the same bulletin board. An advantage of this approach is that participants, simply by being regular listserv or bulletin board users, were familiar and comfortable with the technology. In addition, as regular users of this technology and as active list members, it is less likely that these individuals would drop out of the research, as most would have other motivations for using the site.

However, as with e-mail interviews, such interviews are not carried out in real time and the facilitator cannot, therefore, play an active role in moderating the interview. Thus, the level of group interaction is reduced and the sense of immediacy removed. This type of interaction is also less private than an e-mail interview, as all contributions can be seen by all list or board users and this may lead respondents to be less candid than they would be in a private e-mail or face-to-face interview. Nevertheless, the value of this type of interview lies in its potential for generating lively discussions between the respondents.

Synchronous interviews

In contrast to the growing body of literature that focuses on asynchronous interviews, there has been little academic assessment of the advantages and limitations of synchronous online interviews (Chen and Hinton, 1999). Indeed, with the exception of an early flurry of research which used synchronous interviews, (Gaiser, 1997; Smith, 1998; Chen and Hinton, 1999; Mann and Stewart, 1999; O'Connor and Madge, 2001), there have been few other empirical studies.

The reasons for the low take-up of this approach are unclear. Certainly online synchronous interviews can be more complicated to set up than a basic e-mail interview and this may, in part, explain the lower levels of usage of this online research method. For example, a researcher planning to generate data in this way must begin by selecting an appropriate software package such as conferencing software (O'Connor and Madge, 2001) or chatroom access (Stewart et al., 1998) to facilitate the interview. This can be perceived as requiring rather sophisticated technological skills compared to the use of e-mail, which may act as a disincentive for using this approach.

However, this type of interview does have distinct advantages and, in many respects does closely resemble a traditional face-to-face interview, thereby overcoming some of the limitations of an online asynchronous exchange. As Chen and Hinton (1999) have observed, 'real time' online interviews can provide greater spontaneity than online asynchronous interviews, enabling respondents to answer immediately and, in the case of synchronous focus groups, interact with one another.

Perhaps the most widely used approach to online synchronous interviews has been facilitation through conferencing software (Mann and Stewart, 2000; O'Connor and Madge, 2001). For example, both Stewart et al. (1998) and O'Connor and Madge (2001) utilised conferencing software packages already being used for teaching purposes in their own university departments. Access to the software was arranged by the researchers and downloaded by the participants. Synchronous interviews of this type are facilitated in a chatroom-type environment. Figure 15.1 illustrates a typical virtual interface as seen

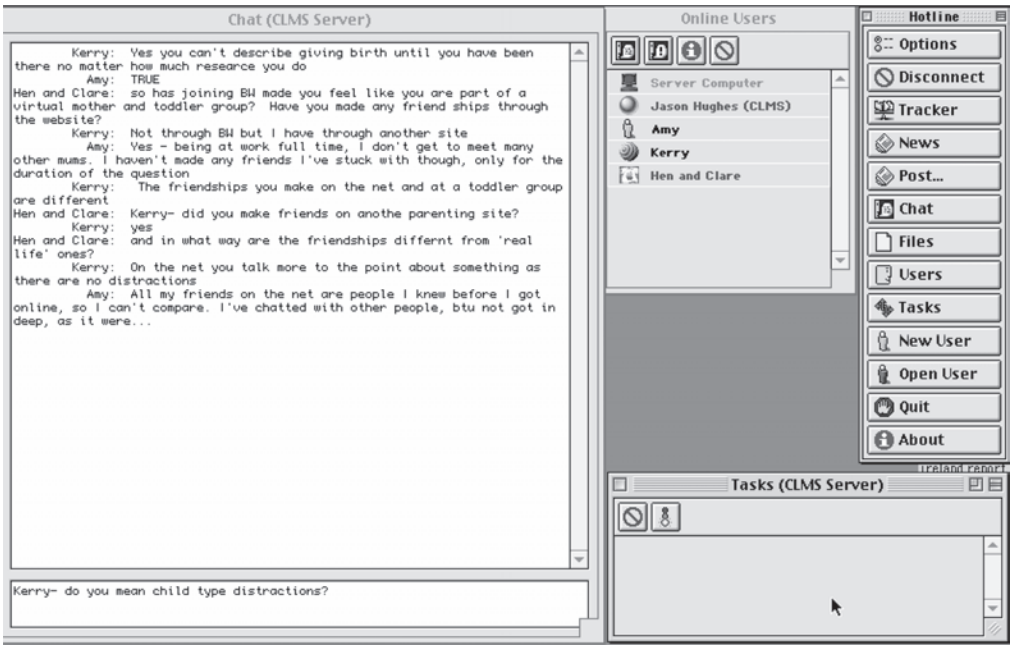

Figure 15.1 Screenshot of the virtual interface during synchronous chat
Source: O'Connor and Madge (2001)

by participants. The screen consists of a number of different windows and a toolbar. There is a large 'chat' window in which the dialogue is displayed; beneath that is a smaller window where users type their text. When they press 'return', seconds later the contribution is displayed, prefixed with their name.

Such interfaces are most familiar to those who regularly use chatroom facilities. This may mean that such an approach to interviewing is most suited to individuals who regularly use chatrooms, such as teenagers (Stewart et al., 1998). By contrast, e-mail is used much more widely and participants are likely to be more comfortable in such a familiar environment.

However, an important advantage of the synchronous interview, already alluded to, is that the real time nature of the exchanges has much in common with the traditional onsite interview. Unlike asynchronous interviews, where there is time to edit and redraft responses, synchronous interviews can generate more spontaneous answers. This can result in responses being more 'honest' in nature, as there is little time to consider the social desirability of the response in the 'fast and furious environment' (Mann and Stewart, 2000: 153) of the synchronous chat. A downside of this environment is that the fast-paced nature of the discussion generates interview transcripts which can be difficult to interpret. Contributions can be fragmented and rarely follow a sequential form, as the interviewer may post a new question before the respondent has fully replied to the previous question. This results in a transcript which resembles a 'written conversation'. On the positive side, however, as with e-mail interviews, there is no need for the researcher to transcribe interviews as transcripts are automatically created.

There are, then, a number of key differences between synchronous and asynchronous interviews. These differences relate to the choice of software, the virtual interface and the temporal characteristics of each type of interview. However, many other challenges presented by the virtual venue are remarkably similar, regardless of the type of online interview. In the following section we go on

to look at some of the issues common to both types of interview.

CHALLENGES OF ONLINE INTERVIEWS

Researchers who have used online interviews, whether synchronous or asynchronous, report many differences between online and onsite interviews. In particular, issues relating to interview design, the building of rapport, the virtual venue and research ethics present the online researcher with challenges. Often the online researcher has little in the way of research precedent to use as a guide to practice online research and, as a result, online researchers frequently turn to established offline practices. As Hine (2005: 4) argues, 'Face-to-face interaction … becomes the gold standard against which the performance of computer-mediated interaction is judged'.

In the disembodied interview all the subtle visual, non-verbal cues which can help to contextualise the interviewee in a face-to-face scenario are lost. This represents an immense challenge to the researcher, given that the traditional textbook guides to interviewing rely heavily on the use of visual and physical cues and pointers in order to build rapport and gain the trust of the interviewee. Online interviewers have, therefore, sought alternative ways of creating a relaxed environment: for example, through the use of virtual visual aids such as photographs on project web pages, to help build rapport with respondents (see O'Connor and Madge, 2001). Below we consider in more detail challenges such as online recruitment, representativeness, interview conduct and design, respondent identity verification, building rapport and research ethics.

ONLINE RECRUITMENT

A key concern for conducting both onsite and online interviews is the recruitment of an appropriate group of respondents. In many ways the Internet simplifies matters, as it provides access to groups of users with tightly defined and narrow interests, for example, new parents (O'Connor and Madge, 2001), breast cancer patients (Sharf, 1997; Orgad, 2005), and users of health-related websites (Kivits, 2004; 2005). However, although the Internet potentially provides researchers with easily accessible participants with narrowly defined interests, the process of recruitment can be complex. Perhaps the simplest and most widely used approach to gaining access to users of specific websites is for a researcher to contact website providers or discussion-board moderators directly. For O'Connor and Madge (2001), whose interest was in new parents' use of a particular parenting website, contacting the website providers directly was a logical first step in accessing respondents. Similarly, both Murray and Sixsmith (1998) and Kivits (2004) accessed respondents by contacting the moderator of the boards and arranging access and permission to use the site for contacting participants. Such an approach can also result in valuable publicity and support for the research.

Once access is agreed, the task of recruitment begins. Researchers report varying levels of success with different approaches to recruitment. One approach is the posting of a general message to a bulletin board, introducing the research and advertising for volunteers to participate. Alternatively, e-mail addresses can sometimes be identified from postings to discussion boards and Murray and Sixsmith (1998) suggest using these e-mail addresses to contact potential respondents directly. Care must be taken, however, when posting to discussion groups to request participation. Hewson et al. (2003: 116) suggest that netiquette demands that postings to a newsgroup or discussion forum should be relevant; yet this poses a problem, because most researchers' invitations to join a research project will not be directly relevant to the intended discussion. This raises ethical issues for the online researcher. The best practice is to approach the moderator of the list or newsgroup or discussion forum directly to get permission for the invitation posting, but to be sensitive to the fact that such an invitation

may be considered spamming and therefore unacceptable.

REPRESENTATIVENESS

Selecting research respondents from the online world also raises issues of representativeness, common to all social science research. However, there are issues associated with the Internet which raise issues of representativeness specific to the type of research – not least, access to the Internet itself. As Mann and Stewart (2000: 31) suggest, 'Access to the Internet is a matter not only of economics, but also of one's place in the world in terms of gender, culture, ethnicity and language.' Indeed, 'Most research on the Internet is centred in Anglo-American cultural contexts' (Jankowski and van Selm (2005: 203) and language use online has been, until recently, predominantly English (Thurlow et al., 2004: 121).

Dillman (2007: 449), writing about the use of online surveys, suggests that although web surveys have much to offer the survey researcher, 'Web surveys have not taken over the survey world.' The reasons for this are largely attributable to differential computer and Internet access, and wide variations in levels of computer skills amongst the population as a whole. He argues that 'Whereas it is routine to expect nearly all adults to be able to talk to an interviewer or write answers on a paper questionnaire, many people still lack sufficient understanding of computers to be a respondent if … selected' (ibid). The digital divide then, is still a very real barrier, and some individuals and geographical areas are less Internet-connected than others. This raises a serious shortcoming of Internet-based research, often promoted as offering research potential unrestricted by geographical boundaries. Online research methods remain:

> … very geographically specific, limiting who we can 'speak' to and whose lives we can engage with. The potential to be involved in a study using online research methods is, therefore, partial, so any grand claims of the utility of such methods for internationalizing research must be treated with some caution (Madge, 2006).

Orgad's (2006) work is a good example of online research which, like much online research, suffers from biases outlined above. She suggests that her research, focused on users of breast-cancer-related online spaces, was biased in a number of ways. First, participants were recruited through specialist websites, which were located by searching for only 'top-level global domain websites' (defined as those with addresses ending with .com, .org and .net). As a consequence of this rather restricted search process the research suffered a North American bias, as all other 'national domain websites' were excluded from the study. She also restricted her research to English-language websites. This language bias is true of much social research into website use; for example, O'Connor and Madge (2001) also recruited participants from only one English-language, UK-based website.

Other issues can impact on the representativeness of online research. For example, there is no central register of Internet users and although some websites may have membership lists, these do not include 'lurkers' or individuals who have chosen not to register. Likewise, a sample group drawn in the ways outlined above will inevitably exclude from the sample those individuals who chose not to answer calls for respondents.

Despite these limitations, Comley (1996) and Coomber (1997) have suggested that the Internet is most suitable as a methodological tool when researching a particular group of Internet users. Gaiser (1997: 136) is in agreement, stating that: '… if the research question involves an online social phenomenon, a potential strength of the method is to be researching in the location of interest'. Samples drawn from groups of Internet users then can provide '… a valuable source of indicative as opposed to easily generalisable data' (Coomber, 1997: 1). Indeed, it can be argued that regardless of issues such as the spatial and social restrictions associated with Internet use, social research carried

out online can give a voice to groups who would otherwise be very difficult to contact or difficult to interview face to face. Mann and Stewart (2000: 17–18) suggest that online methods represent a considerable advantage over offline methods when the research group of interest is 'hard to reach', for example, people with disabilities and illness; when the site of interest has 'closed site access', such as hospitals and prisons; when the research topic is sensitive and face-to-face communication could be inhibiting; when the research site is dangerous, for example, war zones; and when the group of interest has a very narrowly defined common interest, for example illness-specific.

CONDUCTING THE INTERVIEW

Online methodological approaches such as online interviews have, thus far, established little in the way of accepted or established methodological practice. Indeed, this lay behind the 'considerable anxiety' that we earlier noted was reported by Hine (2005: 1) as to whether 'existing tried and tested research methods are appropriate for technologically mediated interactions'. Much of the existing research based on data generated through online interviews has focused on adapting offline practices, such as techniques for building rapport (O'Connor and Madge, 2001). Researchers have stressed the importance of replicating, as closely as possible, the face-to-face method, with James and Busher (2006: 405) seeking a methodological approach that 'replicated as closely as possible … the normal processes of qualitative, face-to-face interviewing'.

Traditional interview etiquette suggests that, in a face-to-face interview, the interviewer begins by providing a brief introduction to the research project, an explanation of the interview procedure and perhaps a general overview of the questions included in the interview. In most cases the interviewer would have had prior contact with the interviewee, making initial contact and arranging a suitable venue and interview time. During these interactions the research project would have been introduced and the interviewer's aims outlined. The virtual interviewer will often lack these early interactions and opportunities for the building of rapport. Gleaning facts concerning profile data and ensuring that the participant feels at ease are possibly missed. It is important, then, for the virtual interviewer to develop strategies which compensate for the lack of face-to-face meetings. These strategies are discussed in more detail below.

DESIGNING THE INTERVIEW SCRIPT

Before commencing the interview, there is a need to decide how to inform participants about the interview procedure: for example, a brief introduction to the aims of the interview, its estimated length, and the types of question. It may also be necessary to remind participants how to contribute to an online discussion. James and Busher (2006: 408) sent participants detailed 'rubrics' explaining the format of their e-mail interviews and outlining data-protection and privacy issues. O'Connor and Madge (2001) also provided participants with general information and an explanation of the process at the outset of their interviews (see boxed example overleaf).

This introduction was followed with another prepared piece of text, which introduced the researchers by describing their gender, age, ethnicity, and family and employment status. This was done with two specific aims in mind – in the absence of visual cues O'Connor and Madge (2001) wanted to create a text-based picture of themselves: first, to facilitate rapport and second, to elicit profile data from the respondents which would have been visually apparent in a face-to-face interview. This method of establishing respondent identity and building rapport is discussed in more detail below.

ESTABLISHING RESPONDENT IDENTITY

In the virtual setting the interviewer cannot make any assessment of the

EXAMPLE

GUIDELINES

We want the interview to flow as much as possible and for you to feel that you can contribute exactly what you want to the discussion – almost as if we were having a conversation. However, we think it might be worth mentioning a few guidelines prior to starting the discussion.

> As this is an 'interview', we do have some topics that we would like to cover and we will probably use these to guide the discussion. However, please feel free to ask questions yourselves and to raise any topics that you think are relevant that we have not mentioned – but do try and stick as much as possible to the theme of the Internet and parenting.
>
> It may take a while for the response you send to appear on screen – a good technique to speed the process up is to press 'return' frequently, i.e. send the text every few words – don't wait till you have a complete sentence. Because of this the discussion may get a bit 'jumbled'. If this happens, we may need to intervene.
>
> This virtual interview is an 'experiment' and we anticipate there may be teething problems – we apologise for this in advance!

Do you have any questions before we start the discussion?

socio-demographic information that may have an impact on the interview. Indeed, Ward (1999) found that, as a consequence of this, interviewees asked her questions about her own socio-demographic profile, which changed the power relations of the interview and gave her less control as an interviewer. It is perhaps necessary, therefore, to find other ways of obtaining socio-demographic information and to adapt conventional techniques accordingly. O'Connor and Madge (2001) made use of carefully designed personal introductions to allow for the loss of face-to-face interaction and in the hope that participants would follow their 'model' and provide similar profile information, such as age, number and age of children, and ethnicity. After cutting and pasting personal information, interviewees were invited to introduce themselves. This approach proved successful and respondents mirrored the contributions of the researchers, providing detailed profile data which also gave respondents information about the other members of the focus group.

Whilst both O'Connor and Madge (2001) and Ward (1999) used 'covert' means of finding out more about their participants, Thurlow et al. (2004) suggest that this mechanism is unnecessary in the virtual world. They argue that questions which would be unacceptably direct in a face-to-face encounter are widely used and accepted in the online environment. They explain that more experienced online users have an established 'system', known as 'MORFing', which enables users to find out more about the individuals they are chatting to. 'MORFing' represents the question 'are you Male OR Female' and is much used in computer-mediated communication as a means of finding out about others online. The abbreviation A/S/L is also used to find out the age, sex and location of those online (Thurlow et al., 2004: 53). Clearly, then, much face-to-face etiquette would appear to be unnecessary in the online world, where netiquette enables users to be much more direct than in the real world, primarily because visual clues are lacking. However, it is important that other online users do not misconstrue the meaning of such direct questions and perceive them as offensive or as a 'flame'. Clearly, Thurlow et al.'s (2004) system would work only if users

were highly familiar with 'netlingo'. Amongst less experienced users these acronyms would be rendered meaningless. In addition, the acceptance and use of these terms certainly does not mean that the responses given are genuine or valid.

An advantage of online interviews is that although profile data can be gleaned by direct questioning of users or by more covert means, there is, in fact, no need for any of the participants to divulge personal information. This represents an advantage, because it can help to minimise interviewer bias. It can also be valuable when discussing sensitive topics with respondents who do not want to be identifiable in any way. Online interviews, particularly those which are carried out in a chatroom, can be conducted on an anonymous basis. Participants interviewed by e-mail can retain anonymity by setting up an e-mail account which does not identify the user's real name. However, the corollary of this is that participants may not always be what they seem, as it is possible in an online environment to hide or invent personas. Hewson et al. (2003) argue that researchers cannot ever be certain of respondent identity in an online situation, because there is always the possibility of users inventing an online personality or at least not being entirely truthful in describing themselves.

BUILDING RAPPORT

Building rapport online, without the usual visual cues used in a face-to-face interview, can be a challenge for the online interviewer. The traditional researcher relies quite heavily on visual cues and such cues can be helpful in building rapport. For example, traditional textbooks recommend dressing appropriately, smiling and making eye contact at the outset. It is also suggested that non-verbal cues and prompts such as smiles and nods are used to facilitate the interview. In the disembodied online interview, both the interviewer and interviewee are relying on the written word as a means of building rapport. Orgad (2005: 55) has argued that 'There is a real challenge in building rapport online. Trust, a fragile commodity … seems ever more fragile in a disembodied, anonymous and textual setting.' As such, Orgad suggests a number of ways in which to overcome the lack of visual pointers and she suggests that researchers should think carefully about the implication of the e-mail address used in the research. It may be that for researchers based in universities it is wise to utilise a university e-mail address, to add credibility to the study. However, she also argues that a university e-mail address could have hindered her research, because it identified her as a 'stranger' to regular users of a health-related online discussion group.

Kivits (2005) explains that in facilitating the early stages of her e-mail interviews, she consciously used the technique of sharing personal information. So her e-mails, which included interview questions, usually began or ended with exchanges of more general personal information such as holidays, family life and work. This technique helped to maintain a certain level of rapport and also made it easier for Kivits to develop an online relationship which enabled her to ask questions of a more sensitive nature.

O'Connor and Madge (2001) were aiming to replicate, online, the kind of rapport they believed would have occurred 'naturally' in a face-to-face meeting. Their approach was influenced by feminist approaches to research which stress the importance of equal power relationships within interviewer/interviewee exchanges, and self-disclosure on the part of the interviewer (Oakley, 1981; Finch, 1993). Within such approaches it is suggested that shared characteristics between interviewer and respondent will often result in a good level of rapport, with minimum effort. Therefore, O'Connor and Madge (2001), in their interviews with new parents, attempted to build rapport by mirroring, as far as possible, mechanisms which can work in face-to-face interviews. By developing detailed textual exchanges rich with self-disclosure and by posting visual aids, they aimed to create virtually what would exist in a face-to-face environment. They stressed

aspects of similarity between themselves and their respondents, such as gender, age, ethnicity, limited parenting experience and the shared stress of arranging life around young children and newborn babies. Their respondents were directed to a project website, which included both further information about the project and photographs of the researchers, to find out more about the research. Thus, once the respondents 'arrived' at the interview, they had an idea of what the interviewers looked like in real life.

O'Connor and Madge (2001: 11.2) argue that their approach was highly effective in creating rapport and generating rich, valuable interview data. By stressing their similarities with respondents, in this case through self-disclosure and the use of photographs, whilst simultaneously reinforcing their status as 'insiders', they were able to create an interview environment which was 'anonymous, safe and non-threatening'.

However, it may be that going to such lengths to replicate traditional interview methods in an online setting is a misplaced technique. As suggested earlier in this chapter, the use of online interviews thus far represents little more than a change of 'place'. Aside from interviewing in a virtual rather than a 'real' space, online researchers have done little more than transfer traditional, and in some cases outdated, approaches to a new arena. The issue of rapport is a good example of this practice. As outlined above, online interviewers have gone to great lengths to create rapport in a virtual environment, using traditional techniques such as self-disclosure. However, progress made in the offline world has not necessarily been reflected in online research practice. For example, offline researchers have begun to question the value of self-disclosure as a means of stressing similarities in the interview process. Abell et al. (2006: 241), suggest that the success of the self-disclosure strategy depends 'upon acts of "doing similarity" being received as such by the respondents'. They stress that there is a real risk that respondents will not perceive self-disclosure in the way it is intended, and rather than encouraging rapport this technique may serve to inhibit the respondent. They go on to argue that 'often through a sharing of experiences, the interviewer paradoxically exemplifies differences between themselves and the interviewee'. In an online environment where 'a stranger wanting to do academic research is seen as an unwelcome, arbitrary intrusion' (Paccagnella, 1997: 3), and where there may therefore already be a risk of the researcher being perceived as an 'outsider', it is important that researchers are aware of current debates – not just online, but also offline.

ONLINE INTERACTION

The issues outlined above all focus on ways to recreate the traditional, face-to-face interview experience. In the following section we move on to look in more depth at some aspects of the online interview which have few similarities with offline research and, as such, may present the online researcher with new, largely unprecedented challenges. The first issue discussed below is anonymity.

An often-mentioned challenge of online research relates to its lack of visuality. Internet users are physically invisible to each other and when 'conversing' online, assuming that webcams are not being used, see only their computer screen. This means that the traditional reliance on visual cues during the interview encounter is absent from online interactions. Online researchers have, then, discussed, in some detail, methods of replacing the visual, that is, means of replicating the role of visual cues by other means. We have already discussed this in relation to building rapport. However, visual prompts are also valuable during the interview and are often used to probe respondents further. For example, textbooks often advocate the use of non-verbal communication, such as silences and nods and smiles, in order to encourage respondents to expand their answers to questions. The lack of visuality makes such methods impossible.

An online silence can represent a number of scenarios – it could be that the respondent has withdrawn from the research, or it could be that he/she has been interrupted by someone/something else, or it could be due to a hardware or software problem. As O'Connor and Madge (2001: 10.11) found, a silence may occur because the respondent is 'thinking, typing or had declined to answer the question'. The interviewer can interpret silences in any of these ways. It is important, then, that the researcher puts strategies in place to cope with such silences. James and Busher (2006) sent chatty reminder e-mails to non-responders during their e-mail interviews. O'Connor and Madge (2001) dealt with silences by very direct questioning as to the whereabouts of the respondent – in a manner which could have been construed as impolite in face-to-face encounters. In deciding how to handle 'silences', it is imperative that the online researcher acts in an ethical manner, allowing respondents to use silence as a way of withdrawing from the research. Ethical issues relating to withdrawal are discussed in more depth below.

The preceding discussion has focused on the negative aspects of anonymity in online interviews. It is important also, however, to highlight the many positive impacts of the anonymous nature of Internet-mediated research methods. Whilst lack of visual indicators means that it can be difficult to make use of traditional interviewing tools, this is more than compensated for by other advantages of the virtual arena.

A key advantage of the anonymous nature of online interaction is that respondents, secure in the knowledge that they are anonymous, have been found to answer with far more candour than those taking part in face-to-face interviews. As Joinson (2005: 23) argues, 'Visual anonymity increases identification with a group by increasing perceived homogeneity of the group … the social cost of self-disclosure is reduced through relative anonymity.' As such, online researchers report that the virtual interview is frequently characterised by the candid nature of responses.

ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN ONLINE RESEARCH

Throughout this chapter we have touched upon the ethical challenges presented by online research methods. These issues are covered in much greater depth by Eynon et al. (this volume). Whilst some of the ethical dilemmas that arise when researching online may mirror those faced when carrying out offline research, a researcher entering the virtual arena will undoubtedly be faced with new ethical challenges. For example, as highlighted in the preceding discussion, is it ethically acceptable for a researcher to enter an established online community for the purposes of research without explaining their purpose? Questions such as this are examined in the following discussion.

Clearly, some of the key ethical issues relating to online research closely reflect the basic ethical principles of onsite research. But is there anything special about the online research environment that necessitates the development of a set of ethical guidelines specifically pertaining to virtual venues? Or can we directly translate ethical principles from onsite research? As Hine (2005: 5) summarises: 'Online research is marked as a special category in which the institutionalised understandings of the ethics of research must be re-examined,' supporting the argument that at minimum we do indeed require discussion about ethical codes specifically pertaining to the online environment.

INFORMED CONSENT

Informed consent with conventional onsite research methods involves treating the participants of social research with respect, using clear and easily understood language to inform them of the nature of the research, the time needed to be involved, the methods to be used and the use to be made of any findings, before gaining their consent to take part (Mann and Stewart, 2000; Vujakovic and Bullard, 2001). All participants should also be made aware of the complaints procedure, and

should be able to withdraw from the research at any point.

Clearly these principles should also apply in the online environment. Participants must be made fully aware of the purpose of the research project. Generally written information about the aims of the project, the roles of the participants and any potential risks should be provided, either as an e-mail, on a dedicated website or bulletin board, or by conventional mail. If gaining consent virtually, a consent form can be provided as an e-mail attachment or on the website, but getting the participants to sign it may not be straightforward. Ideally the consent form would be downloaded electronically and the signed form returned via surface mail or fax to the researcher. In practice this may discourage respondents, so an alternative consists of including a tick box ('I accept') in an e-mail that the respondent can return online to the researcher or on a web page that introduces the interview.

Alternatively, participants could be e-mailed with a password, which is then required in order to take part in the research. This strategy can also ameliorate problems with potential hackers. However, without written signed consent any project formally contravenes European data protection legislation (Mann and Stewart, 2000: 49). It is also likely that online research which does not request written consent from respondents would be unacceptable practice in the US (see www.nsf.gov for more information on the US legislation).

Moreover, concerns have been raised about verifying the identity of consenting participants in cyberspace. For example, it has been suggested that gaining informed consent online can be more problematic than for onsite research, because it is potentially easier for participants to deceive the researcher. In the virtual anonymous realm, how can the researcher verify the participants' identities? In practice, according to Hewson et al. (2003: 52), this type of fraudulence is both relatively rare and easily detected. They suggest that the problem is, for the most part, insignificant and problematic only for those online researchers who require a highly accurate sample. In such cases their advice is that researchers should aim to verify findings by using an offline sample in addition to an online sample.

James and Busher (2006) take a different approach to verifying the accounts provided by respondents in e-mail interviews. They argue that the nature of e-mail interviews gives little room for deception, as long as the interviewers encourage respondents to reflect upon their narratives as the research encounter progresses. By probing and revisiting earlier exchanges as the e-mail interview continued over time, James and Busher argue that they were able to be more certain about the 'credibility and authenticity' of the accounts provided by their interviewees. Whilst online researchers need to be aware of issues surrounding deception and the authenticity and validity of data collected by means of an online interview, it is important to bear in mind that such challenges are common to much social research, and the issues outlined above are also present in onsite research (Johns et al., 2004: 117).

WITHDRAWAL FROM THE RESEARCH

The ability to withdraw from the research at any time is a central tenet of informed consent. Withdrawal from a synchronous virtual interview can be achieved by locating a 'withdraw' button available at all times in the chat window, whilst withdrawal from an asynchronous interview can be achieved by simple non-response. But during virtual interviews sudden withdrawal of a participant can be met with confusion: does the interviewee no longer wish to participate? Is there a technical problem with the Internet connection? How should the interviewer follow up this withdrawal to find out? How many follow-up e-mails to find out where the participant has gone would it take before being considered spamming and intrusive? These are issues still to be decided upon. However, as Johns et al. (2004: 116) suggest, withdrawal is also significant in onsite research and, in fact, a participant may feel freer to withdraw from an

online project as there are fewer face-to-face social pressures.

Having highlighted a number of challenges faced by the online researcher, the following section moves on to introduce more practical advice. As such, a technical guide which includes information on selecting software is provided below.

TECHNICAL GUIDE

A wide variety of software and services is available to facilitate online communication and, depending on the context of the research, it is possible for researchers to make use of any of these to carry out online interviews. In the following section of this chapter an overview is provided of some of the more common types of software and services available for asynchronous and synchronous online interviews with individuals and groups.

Asynchronous interviews

Software for asynchronous interviews can be divided into two types: e-mail applications and discussion-board software and services. E-mail is particularly appropriate for individual interviews, though the 'copy-to' function of most e-mail applications may allow their use for small-group interviews. The main advantages of using e-mail are that it is more likely to be familiar and available to researchers and participants, it does not present problems with the compatibility of different software and systems, and it allows responses to be made privately. Discussion-board software and services are more likely to be of use for asynchronous group interviews, as they allow multiple participants to view and respond to postings from the researcher or other participants when convenient. Like e-mail, discussion boards are unlikely to present compatibility problems and any participant with an Internet-enabled computer is likely to be able to access and contribute to a board.

Researchers planning to carry out interviews via discussion boards may wish to target an existing discussion board on a website, or to create and moderate their own board for invited participants. Although there are particular ethical issues that must be considered where an existing board is used, there is likely to be less technical difficulty for the researcher, who simply requires access to a computer with an Internet connection. Creating a discussion board for the interviews, however, involves the use either of a software and hosting service or the installation of software on a server which the researcher has access to. Where a software and hosting service is used, the process is relatively straightforward from a technical perspective. The discussion board can usually be designed and managed through a simple interface on the website of the hosting service, and the location of the board can be distributed to participants through sending the URL or adding a link to the board to any web page. Options such as requiring a password for access and selecting threaded or flat boards are frequently offered, and it is often possible to sample the service through fully functional demonstrations for trial periods. Pricing for these services can vary, and most services charge monthly fees. A number of free services are available, though these frequently include advertising. In all cases, it is necessary to check that the privacy and data security offered is adequate for the research. In cases where the researcher has access to a server, it is possible to obtain and install discussion-board software for use in the research. Again, prices vary and there are a number of free Open Source examples, as well as commercial packages. A listing of both software-only options and software and hosting providers is available from the following website: http://thinkofit.com/webconf/.

Synchronous interviews

A wide range of software and services is available for synchronous interviews, including online chat providers, and 'Instant messaging' and Internet telephony services. Many of these services offer facilities for both individual and group interviews and allow

for communication via text or via audio and video.

A number of software companies, Internet Service Providers and search engines offer free access to chatrooms organised by subject area. These allow registered users to browse for rooms of interest and to join text-based chats on the subject concerned. Some examples of online chat providers include Yahoo, Talkcity, Wanadoo and ICQ. Though these chatrooms may provide relatively easy access to participants who share a particular interest, there are likely to be serious ethical implications concerning privacy and participant identification in the fact that access to chatrooms cannot be controlled and informed consent may be difficult to obtain. Automatic recording of the chat may also not be possible. In situations where participants have already been recruited, other software options such as Instant Messaging and Internet telephony services are likely to provide a more secure and appropriate platform for synchronous interviews.

Free Instant Messaging services are offered by a wide range of providers, such as America Online Instant Messenger, Google Talk, ICQ, Jabber and Microsoft Messenger. The key advantage of these services over the free online chat providers is that instant messaging software can be used to set up chats specifically for interviews which can be limited to invited participants only and in which the researcher has a great deal of control over the discussion. One-to-one and group communication is possible with many of the services and automatic transcription is frequently available. A number of extra facilities such as file transfer and desktop sharing are often also available. All the services allow real time, text-based messaging and some also offer video conferencing and/or Internet telephony facilities. This makes audio and video communication possible where the researcher and participants have broadband Internet connections and the necessary equipment (webcams and/or microphones and speakers). The growth of these services, along with the increase in the number, usage and availability of Internet telephony services such as Skype, which allows one-to-one and multi-user audio communication over the Internet, is making their use for audio interviewing increasingly realistic. In most cases, however, users of one type of Instant Messaging or Internet telephony software cannot communicate with users of a different type, and the researcher will need to ensure that all participants have the same software installed. It is also likely to be necessary to provide lists of minimum requirements for participants, such as a broadband Internet connection and any required peripherals.

CONCLUSION

Although the data collected through online interviewing, both synchronous and asynchronous, can be valuable to the researcher, the potential of online research should not be exaggerated. As Hewson et al. (2003: 144) argue: 'While … Internet-mediated primary research has great potential, it is still in its infancy. The technologies and procedures available need researching further.' Further to this, Hine (2004) urges caution in the application of online methods, suggesting that 'Internet-based research is no different from other forms of research. Just as we craft interviews appropriate for particular settings, so too we must learn to craft appropriate forms of online interview.' In conclusion, the data collected through virtual means can be as rich and valuable as that generated via traditional methods. It must, however, be remembered that many of the issues and problems of conventional research methods still apply, because as Kitchin (1998: 395) comments '…the vast majority of social spaces on the Internet bear a remarkable resemblance to real world locales'.

Online interviews then, can be a useful additional tool for social researchers, but we would not suggest that this approach is appropriate for all types of research, and neither do we suggest that online methods will ever replace traditional onsite approaches to research. As Denscombe (2003: 41) has argued, 'A decision on whether it is

appropriate to use "e-research" should be based on an … evaluation of the respective advantages and disadvantages in relation to the specific topic that is to be investigated.'

At present it seems that online interviews, synchronous and asynchronous, occupy an uncertain terrain in the world of social research. To date, the majority of researchers who have used online interviews have done so by adapting traditional, onsite research practices. This, we argue, is no longer sufficient. It is vital that online researchers establish online-specific practice. As Best and Krueger (2004: 1) argue: 'Balancing the possibilities and pitfalls of Internet data collection is neither simple nor straightforward. Scholars cannot merely adopt the practices of traditional communication modes, but must approach the Internet as a unique medium that necessitates its own conventions.'

Even amongst those researchers who have successfully used online interviews, there appears to be some scepticism surrounding their use. This is apparent in the continued use of face-to-face research to supplement and 'verify' data collected through online interviews (Orgad, 2005; Sanders, 2005; James and Busher, 2006). This approach weakens the position of online research methods, as it suggests that online research cannot stand alone as a research methodology. It also invalidates one of the main advantages of online research, which is the ability for researchers to expand the spatial boundaries of their research agenda without the traditional high costs this entails.

Whilst online researchers can, then, be hesitant about the role of online interviews, their use has simultaneously become more mainstream and viewed by some as an 'easy' way to collect data. One of the issues facing the online researcher is that 'Methodological solutions gain much of their authority through precedent, and it is not clear as yet just how far the heritage of research methodology applies to new media and what gaps in our understanding are still to be exposed' (Hine, 2005: 1).

What, then, is the future for online interviews? Ever more rapid developments in the field of computer-mediated communications technology offer new and different media to the social researcher. Some of the issues discussed in this chapter relate to the lack of visibility during online encounters. The increasing use of webcams means that online interviews are not restricted to text-based exchanges and could quickly result in text-based online interviews, and the challenges associated with these, becoming an irrelevance. Similarly the advent of VOIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol) technologies such as Skype, which enable users to communicate via computers but with the advantage that users can both see and hear one another, has potentially huge implications for the future of social research. Such technologies will allow face-to-face interviews to take place in a computer-mediated environment. All that is needed is for the researcher to take up the challenge presented by ever more sophisticated Internet technologies.

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NOTE

Further details of the types of software outlined above, along with a discussion of the potentials of online meeting and collaboration software and online customer support tools for research, can be found in the 'Exploring online research methods' website at http://www.geog.le.ac.uk/orm/interviews/inttechnical.htm.

FURTHER READING

Hine, C. (2004) 'Social research methods and the Internet: a thematic review', *Sociological Research Online*, 9 (2).

This article provides a useful overview of research carried out using online methods and published in the online journal *Sociological Research Online*. The article is of particular value as a commentary on online research methods, and outlines key methodological debates.

Hine, C. (2005) 'Virtual methods and the sociology of Cyber-Social-Scientific knowledge'. In C. Hine (ed.) *Virtual Methods: Issues in Social Research on the Internet*. Oxford: Berg. pp. 1–13.

This chapter provides the introduction to a volume on online research methods edited by Hine. The book itself is a collection of chapters by authors who have used online methods in a range of contexts. This introductory chapter by the editor serves as a valuable account of online, or virtual, methods.

Johns, M.D., Chen, S.S. and Hall, G.J. (eds) (2004) *Online Social Research: Methods, Issues, and Ethics*. New York: Peter Lang.

This book is a valuable resource for the researcher planning to make use of online approaches to data collection. The volume is divided into three sections. The first of these introduces online research methods such as virtual ethnography and online focus groups. The second section discusses issues relating to the use of online methods. The final section represents a particular strength of the book. Here the ethical implications of online research are examined. Those who are planning to use online methods are urged to consult this account of the relevant ethical issues.

Mann, C. and Stewart, F. (2000) *Internet Communication and Qualitative Research*. London: Sage.

This is a 'bible' for the online researcher. Mann and Stewart provide a comprehensive guide to using online research methods which remains at the forefront of texts on this subject. Although it is now some time since it was first published, it remains a significant point of reference for the online researcher.

http://www.geog.le.ac.uk/orm/

This website was funded as part of the UK Economic and Social Research Council's Research Methods Programme. The site provides an introduction to aspects of online research (online questionnaires, online interviews and the ethics of online research). The site is intended to be used as a training resource for postgraduate students and social researchers.