

Review:

Morag A. Gray

Chris Mann & Fiona Stewart (2000). Internet Communication and Qualitative Research: A Handbook for Researching Online. London: Sage, 258 pages, Cloth (0-7619-6626-9) £ 49.50, Paper (0-7619-6627-7) £ 16.99

Table of Contents

[References](#)

[Author](#)

[Citation](#)

This is a very interesting and informative book. For those researchers who have wanted to use online methods in their research project but were not sure how to go ahead, well this is the book for you. It is written very clearly and all chapters contain examples from previously conducted online research studies so one can read the full text as appropriate. This book focuses mainly using the Internet as a data gathering tool and does this very well. [1]

The authors are Chris MANN and Fiona STEWART. Chris MANN states that the impetus for writing this book came from the methodology she developed while conducting the Graduates Millennium project, funded by the University of Cambridge, U.K. She acknowledges the students who took part in the project and thanks them for teaching her about both equity issues and online communication. Fiona STEWART works at Deakin University and has research interests in Young People and Health Risk. It is interesting to note that the joint book writing venture was 90% completed through online communication between the two authors. [2]

In the introduction, the authors clarify terms and introduce the concepts of researching the Internet, towards Internet methodologies and technology. The second chapter entitled *Practicalities using CMC* (Computer-Mediated Communication) covers advantages and disadvantages and Internet access and usage. This chapter is written in a very down to earth style and the authors communicate sound advice which is reinforced by examples. Advantages such as extending access to participants as the Internet has wide geographical access and enables researchers to access hard to reach populations are discussed. Examples provided are those of at home with young children, shift workers, areas which have closed site access (hospitals, prisons, schools) and access to participants in dangerous or politically sensitive areas. The authors cite an illicit drug dealers study which was conducted in this way thereby offering protection to both participants and researchers. Other advantages include cost and time savings, elimination of transcription bias and easier handling of data. Disadvantages discussed include computer literacy for the researcher, focus group moderating training, making contact and recruitment, ensuring co-operation, and

interactive skills online. There is also discussion surrounding access and gender, access and ethnicity and access and age. [3]

The authors then move on to a chapter which is devoted to ethical issues relating to collecting data by the Internet. As one would imagine this chapter includes issues relating to the data protection act as well as obtaining informed consent for online interviewing, chat, conferencing and participant observation. There is also a section on parental permission. Participant risk and withdrawal is discussed as are issues of confidentiality, anonymity and netiquette. The principles of fair information processing online are discussed under a number of headings: Personal data should be collected for one specific legitimate purpose; People should have access to the data collected about themselves; Existence of data banks should be publically known; Personal data should be reasonably guarded against risks such as unauthorised access, modification or disclosure; Data should be collected in a context of free speech; and finally, Personal data are not to be communicated externally without the consent of the subject who supplied the data. The issues of confidentiality and anonymity are discussed in the context of research procedures and the authors draw parallels to the precautions taken in face to face interviewing; namely secure storage of materials and use of pseudonyms. The authors suggest that some aspects of netiquette offer online researchers the beginning of an ethical framework on which to base their actions. They refer to RINALDI's (1996) Ten Commandments for Computer Ethics but sadly they do not cite what they are. However, they do outline some of the netiquette issues which are likely to inform online research practice. In the section on email netiquette, the authors provide a number of suggestions, for example, they warn against using smileys in the first communication contact with participants as they believe the early exchange of messages should be akin to introductory paper correspondence which adopts a conventional and perhaps even formal tone. They state that while netiquette has evolved informally, there are signs that it may increasingly be given legal force and that many funding bodies consider the adoption of good practice norms for online research as mandatory. [4]

This chapter is followed by an introduction to online methods including standardised and non-standardised interviews, observational techniques, participant observation, collecting personal documents and mixed methods. These issues are covered in some depth and many of the examples are very relevant and useful. These include the variety of ways in which email surveys can be conducted and analysed; the advantages and disadvantages of web-page-based surveys; a comparison between conventional and online standardised interviews which includes cost; time; reach and anonymity; examples of previous research studies which used non-standardised online interviews and the practicalities of organising non-standardised online interviews (sampling strategies; access to participants; giving instructions). [5]

Conducting Focus groups online is discussed in detail in Chapter 5. This chapter was particularly useful as the examples allows the reader to gain a valuable insight into the mechanics of conducting online focus groups. Again there are

very good examples given to illustrate the points being made by the authors. For example, there is a very detailed account of the use of "First Class" Conferencing system in Deakin University for online teaching and support of distance learners. The authors discuss the importance of the environment for focus groups and include examples of welcome messages. They also provide very practical advice on how to handle participant dynamics, group conflict, and participant disclosure issues. [6]

Chapter 6 concentrates on the interviewer and how to make the best use of online of both individual and focus group interview techniques. The content covers the purpose and focus of the interview; aspects of technological expertise; interpersonal expertise; relational expertise in group discussions; asking questions one-to-one; asking questions in groups and finishing interviews. The chapter is peppered with useful examples. [7]

The remaining four chapters cover a variety of areas such as power issues and the Internet; Language, Mode and Analysis, Virtuality and Data and Future Directions. There is a comprehensive glossary and the appendices contain examples of an online consent form, an email text-based survey and a web-page-based survey. [8]

In conclusion, this is a very useful text which I warmly recommend to all qualitative researchers who use or are anticipating using the Internet for data collection. [9]

References

Rinaldi, Arlene H. (1996). *The ten commandments for computer ethics*. In *The Net: User Guidelines and Netiquette* [Online]. Available at: <http://www.fau.edu/netiquette/net/index.html>.

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