

Crim321/Week13

Qualitative Research in a Digital Age



Portions of this presentation were delivered
by Ted Palys & Chris Atchison as a keynote address at the
10th Annual Advances in Qualitative Methods Conference

Qualitative Research in a Digital Age

- Another title for today's lecture would be "the future of qualitative research"
- It brings together three elements:
 - (1) the social dynamics that have been triggered, fostered and fed by the colonization of the internet;
 - (2) the digital technologies themselves and the many opportunities they provide
 - (3) techniques/practices CA and I have incorporated into and experimented with in our own research
- Place to start is with some history

A History of the Internet

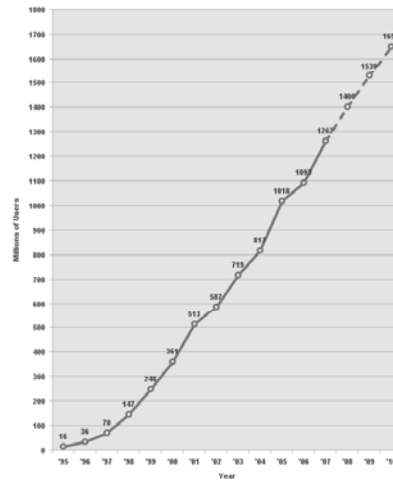
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9hIQjrMHTv4>

Colonizing the Internet

- Particularly after the development of the visual browser, web pages and hyperlinks, the internet took off.
- But this was not until about 1993 or 1994 when *Mosaic* and *Netscape*, respectively, were released.
- Over time, access and use has grown dramatically, although biases still exist

Colonizing the Internet

Internet Users in the World
Growth 1995 - 2010



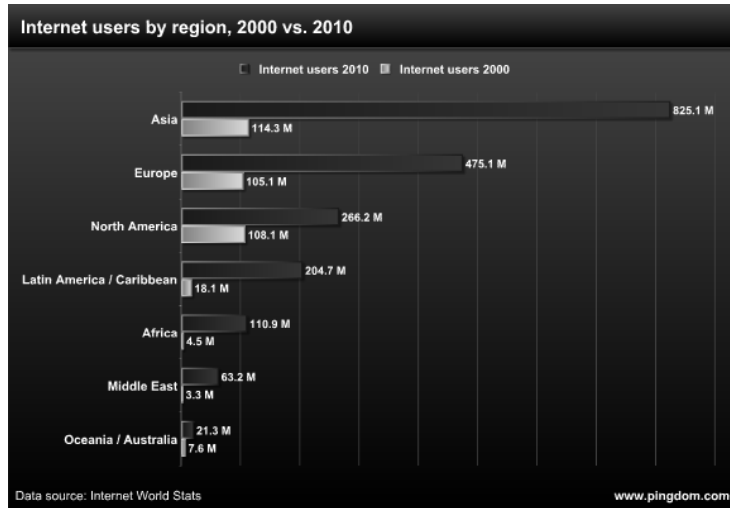
Source: www.internetofdata.com - January, 2009
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Colonizing the Internet



<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/8552410.stm>

Colonizing the Internet



Colonizing the Internet

Characteristics of household Internet users, by location of access
(Any location)

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
	Any location				
	% of all households				
All households	41.8	51.3	60.2	61.6	64.2
Household type					
Single family with unmarried children under age 18	59.0	71.2	80.5	81.2	83.7
Single family without unmarried children under age 18	38.7	46.7	55.6	58.9	63.0
One-person household	22.1	27.9	36.2	37.5	39.8
Multi-family household	55.1	64.3	73.9	75.3	73.2
Age of head of household					
Under age 35	53.0	66.3	76.2	75.4	79.5
Age 35 to 54	54.9	65.7	74.1	75.5	78.8
Age 55 to 64	32.7	42.4	52.5	56.3	59.2
Age 65 and over	10.1	13.9	19.3	21.6	24.9
Education of head of household					
Less than high school	16.1	22.4	29.9	30.2	31.6
High school or college	44.4	55.2	64.6	65.7	69.0
University degree	70.1	79.1	85.8	86.8	87.8
Household income					
Lowest quartile	18.8	23.9	31.6	33.0	35.0
Second quartile	29.2	42.8	51.8	50.9	56.3
Third quartile	48.1	60.6	70.1	74.7	75.3
Highest quartile	71.2	77.9	87.3	87.9	90.3

Note: The tables of the Household Internet survey (HUIS) available from 1997 to 2003 are replaced by the tables of the Canadian Internet use survey (CIUS) beginning with 2005. The unit surveyed is now the individual rather than the household. Only adults aged 18 years and over were surveyed.
Source: Statistics Canada, CANSIM tables (for fee) 358-0003, 358-0004, 358-0005 and 358-0017.
 Last modified: 2005-02-18.

Current Issues

- The initial vision of a free and open internet is constantly being challenged by commercial interests
- The music industry and publishing industry seems especially ground in the 19th century
- Current issues being debated include

Copyright	Net Neutrality
Privacy	Surveillance & Control

Net Neutrality

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G5RQrxkGgCM>

Colonizing the Internet

- What the preceding makes clearer is the social dynamic of internet growth, i.e., the colonization of the internet by particular social groups, the most notable being
 - Academics, researchers
 - Entrepreneurs
 - Students
 - Government
- The social implications of the internet provide qualitative researchers with new venues and new ways to do their research

Colonizing the Internet

- Basically created internet niches that allowed users to get together to create virtual communities
 - The marginalized and rare can find others like themselves
 - Sometimes geography doesn't matter; other times it does
- Chris Atchison was among the first to exploit these

Colonizing the Internet

- Connected with virtual communities in his pioneering web survey of clients of sex workers (1998)
- Was also among the first to talk about principles of netiquette as being vital to establishing rapport, being respectful of quasi-public, quasi-private space
- A decade later these communities had become more localized, shared local interest

Colonizing the Internet

- Growth of the internet and the variety of developments opens up many new spaces for researchers
 - Chat/Network/User sites (e.g., sex clients)
 - Virtual reality sites (e.g., *Second Life*)
 - Social Networking sites (*Facebook, MySpace*)
 - Video sites (*YouTube*)
 - Infinite web pages and resource sites
 - Digital libraries

Sampling

- The potential of social network sites as data sources well known; but can also be venues for participant recruitment
- Requires knowing how/where people of interest to you have colonized their part of the internet
- Two examples from Atchison:
 - Recruiting clients of sex workers through targeted network advertisement
 - Recruiting clients of sex workers “virally”

Sampling

- At this point sampling on the internet is still double-edged
 - On the one hand gives access to extensive samples that were once inaccessible in anything but small numbers; great for qualitative
 - However, to the extent that one’s interests are in generalizing to a population, still limitations
- Reminiscent of the early days of the telephone

Data Collection

- Once infrastructure is created, very little cost thereafter (no paper)
- Easy to make changes if problems arise
- Observation and data gathering can be 24/7
- Greater safety and convenience for both researcher and participant
- You have access to the world without costs of travel, accommodation

Data Collection

- Data in many instances are already digitized which means less cost (no transcription) and no error
- Bringing the tape recorder into the 21st century
 - Out of site, out of mind
 - Removing the restrictions of space
 - Digital recovery of interview data
- Computer-assisted on-line Interviewing
 - New generation of research participant
 - The instant message or text message interview

Data Collection: Surveys

- Internet-based surveys are common but creative use of technology in surveys is not
- Some possibilities:
 - Design so the look and feel of the survey is appealing
 - Allows for various means of administration
 - Text
 - Audio
 - Video
 - Language options
 - Cater the data collection to the analysis programme (Nvivo, AtlasTi, SAS, STATA, or SPSS)

Data Collection: Interviews

- Internet-Based Interviews
 - The internet has brought together previously isolated/esoteric groups, which has also made them more accessible to researchers
 - Can do interviews over email (laborious), internet chat programs, Skype, in *Second Life*
 - Often easy to create a video/audio/text record of the interaction

Data Collection: Interviews

- Internet-Based Interviews
 - Still learning about the ethical issues involved
 - Netiquette – etiquette for the Internet; different groups have different rules for access
 - When and where is “lurking” okay? Where are the boundaries between “public” and “private”?
 - How much of a threat is hackability, *really*?
 - Benefits of more structured survey/interview administration have yet to be realized

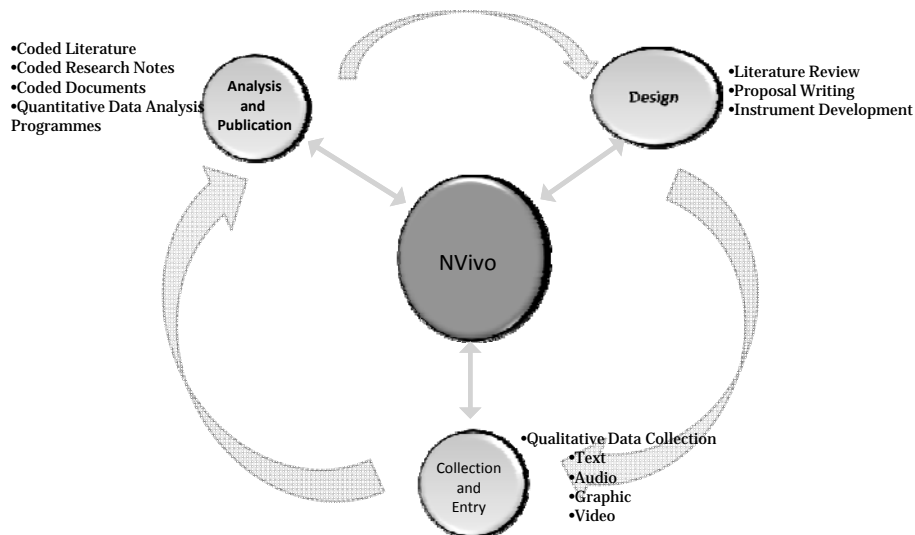
Transcription

- New technology offers new opportunities for getting the material we collect in the field into codable form more easily
- Automated transcription using voice recognition, some options:
 - Inputting a taped interview to the program for transcription
 - Speaking back the interview
 - Training the participant
 - Altering voices and batch conversion

Digital Apps and the Research Process

- Biggest challenges are in gathering and then managing all this information
- Compounded by growth of interdisciplinary and multi-site research teams
- Some continue to apply 20th century information management techniques to 21st century projects
- Existing technologies/software often under-utilized, e.g., *NVivo*

The Challenge of Information Management



Impediments, Obstacles

- There are other considerations that arise from exploiting the technologies and techniques outlined that represent a potential downside
- Three categories
 - Startup
 - Ethical Issues
 - The Academy

Startup

- Two key aspects:
 - Hardware and software requirements
 - Can be expensive but not prohibitively so
 - Often freeware and open source alternatives available
 - Expertise requirement
 - Biggest requirement is willingness to try, experiment, learn
 - For some processes, greater expertise (e.g., ability to set up, script and run servers) required

Ethical Issues

- Two major issues:
 - Security of digital data
 - Data ownership
- Securing Digital Data
 - Maintaining our own servers
 - Anonymizing information
 - Encryption
 - Going off-line
 - Not storing data on mobile computers
 - The impact of the *USA Patriots Act* on confidentiality
- Data Ownership
 - Cloud computing
 - Owning your servers

The Academy

- Challenge of pursuing digital dreams within the academy:
 - Research ethics boards
 - Rarely have people with computing expertise
 - University administrators
 - Blank cheque for quantitative software; nothing for qualitative
 - Resistance from the qualitative community
 - Computing limited to browsing, writing, email
 - Some viewing digitalization as trendy and/or sacrilege

What the Future Might Hold

- Trying to envision the possibilities and stay ahead of the curve in the realm of technology-assisted social research is both enjoyable and a challenge.
- Some issues around the corner are:
 - Trend toward cloud computing
 - Losing control over data not in researchers' or participants' interest; your life as an open book
 - University servers not much better
 - New developments in portable computing
 - iPhones, Blackberry, Android, apps
 - Spontaneous or planned connectivity

