Chapter IV

Conducting Congruent, Ethical, Qualitative Research in Internet-Mediated Research Environments

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ABSTRACT

Research practices in Internet-mediated environments are influenced by the dynamic interplay of online, onground and technical research spheres. This chapter illuminates the different ways in which studies can be located within these spheres and explores the resulting implications for researcher-participant relationships. Issues of participant recruitment, data collection, data use and ownership, trust and voice are discussed. The authors suggest that to conduct ethical qualitative research online, the researcher is required to develop and demonstrate awareness of the specific Internet-mediated research contexts, knowledge of technologies used and of research practices congruent with the situatedness of the study.
INTRODUCTION

The rapid adoption of the Internet has resulted in many recent changes in economic, political, social and psychological spheres of human and social interactions (e.g., Castells, 1996; Gergen, 1991; Surratt, 2001; Turkle, 1995). From conducting e-business to debating politics to exploring multiple identities online, many people using the Internet are experiencing human interactions in very different ways than they would in onground communities. The medium used, in this case the Internet, both shapes and forms human and social interactions and is shaped by human and social interactions (McLuhan, 1964). Therefore, it is important to recognize how technical and social realms are connected and inform each other; and, more specifically, how research practices are shaped and being shaped by technologies used.

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) define qualitative research as:

“... a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 3).

But in an Internet-mediated research setting what is the “natural setting” that Denzin and Lincoln refer to? The natural setting could be conceptualized as being located in the interplays of online, onground and technical research spheres. We suggest that in order to conduct online research, awareness of the interplay of these three spheres is important for the development of ethical, virtual research practices. Researchers need to expand their own traditional onground knowledge of research ethics to include the understanding of technologies used and an awareness of their impact on human and social interactions.

From this interplay, new conceptualizations of research practices may arise that go beyond traditional research methods and ethics, creating research practices that are congruent with innovative Internet-mediated research environments. The intent of this chapter is to add to the discussion of what constitutes ethical online qualitative research by illuminating how the situatedness of both researchers and participants in technically-mediated environments actively shapes research processes. When conducting qualitative research online, it is important to ask the following questions: How are the technical characteristics of the Internet enabling research interactions? What are the human and social implications of using this new medium? Extended into the contexts of conducting qualitative research online, the questions become: How do technical characteristics of the Internet influence qualitative research? What social and ethical implications do Internet-mediated forms of human and social interactions have on qualitative research practices, specifically researcher-participant relationships?

First, the social and technical contexts of Internet-mediated research are illuminated and the implications of the interplay of three research spheres, online, onground and technical, for human and social interactions are discussed. How these changed cultural
contexts impact qualitative research practices is then illustrated by exploring issues of participant recruitment, data collection, trust and voice. Later sections will provide guidelines for congruent, ethical online qualitative research practices. All explorations are grounded in cybertecture, virtual and traditional research methods literature as well as many professional conversations and research experiences.

INTERNET-MEDIATED RESEARCH CONTEXTS

When conducting research using virtual space, three spheres of interactions inform the research process: online, onground and technical (see Figure 1).

The online sphere encompasses the virtual space and all forms of actions that are completed within it, for example, a conversation in a chatroom. The onground sphere encompasses the material world and all actions grounded in physical realities, for example, the institution that employs the researcher. The technical sphere is grounded in the onground world and enables the virtual—it connects the onground and online worlds, forming the latter. The technical contexts in which the online research is embedded consist of many parts. For example: hardware, software, infrastructure, bandwidth as well as local, institutional, national and global information and communication laws and policies. In Internet-mediated research both researcher and participants are located in onground and online communities within their specific cultural parameters and their technologically-mediated interactions are influenced by the interplay of all three spheres.

When considering the growing field of Internet research, one can observe that it has been conducted in diverse quantitative and qualitative ways. Given the methodological variety seen in Internet research, the relevance of online, onground and technical spheres differs in relevance to the study. Ethical implications need to be considered

*Figure 1: Interplay of Online, Onground and Technical Research Spheres in Internet-Mediated Research*
within their unique contexts and primary locations within the three spheres. For example, online surveys have been conducted (e.g., Tapscott, 1998; Wellman, Quan-Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001), psychological experiments undertaken (e.g., Buchanan & Smith, 1999), ethnographic studies of online communities conducted (e.g., Baym, 2000; Markham, 1998; Smith & Kollock, 1999; Turkle, 1995) and Web content analyzed and archived (e.g., Schneider & Larsen, 2000). In these studies, the spaces in which the research is conducted, the location of researchers and participants, their relationship to each other and the form of data collected, varies tremendously.

For example, in an ethnographic study of a virtual community, the researcher and participants interact directly with each other and the virtual community is the actual research focus (e.g., Baym, 1999; Markham, 1998). In this form of Internet-mediated research, the research field is primarily located online. Research findings are interpreted within the contexts of virtual communities. They are primarily written referring to online identities, actions and language use without necessarily connecting these identities with onground realities. They are located within the technical parameters that enable cyberspace.

A survey posted online, however, locates the researcher and participants primarily in their onground communities. Both parties asynchronously post and reply to the survey (e.g., Bampton & Cowton, 2002). In these surveys the virtual sphere is used as a space in which data is collected. It is not the virtual space itself that is studied but primarily people’s ideas and opinions in their onground lives about a specific topic. In this kind of research, people’s onground realities are important and the Internet is used as a technology that enables this particular study to be conducted in a specific way—very similar to research surveys conducted via telephone.

In yet other studies, the integration of the Internet into people’s lives is the research focus (e.g., Kiesler, Kraut, Lundmark, Patterson, Mukopadhyay, & Scherlis, 1998; Hampton & Wellman, 1999; Wellman et al., 2001). It is explored primarily through onground contacts and inclusion of the analysis of the use of Internet-mediated interactions (e.g., e-mail, listserv, Web). Again the researcher and participants are primarily situated in onground settings, but this time the use of the Internet itself and its relevance for people’s onground lives is studied.

Electronic data collection from listserv archives or from an archived website (e.g., Schneider & Larsen, 2000) represents other forms of primarily technologically-mediated research. In this research methodology, there is usually no direct interaction between the researcher and participant (listserv member or website designer)—the analysis of technologically-mediated texts and images is the focus of the study. All methodologies and spheres can overlap and are in dynamic interaction with each other. This can be seen in studies where researcher and participants initially meet in virtual space and follow up with meetings in person.

In the early years of Internet research, it seemed that traditional research methodology (e.g., ethnography, survey, discourse analysis) and research methods (e.g., interviews, participant observation) used for conducting studies in physical environments were applied in more or less the same form to study virtual interactions. As stated in the “Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans,” ethical principles guiding traditional research are based on the following principles: respect for human dignity, respect for free and informed consent, respect for vulnerable persons, respect for privacy and confidentiality, respect for justice and inclusiveness,
balancing of harms and benefits, minimizing of harm and maximizing of benefits (National Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, 1999). In general, these remain applicable when conducting online research; however an expansion of these concepts is necessary to include human interactions in Internet-mediated environments. Existing ethical guidelines for researchers do not yet address the interplay of research spheres sufficiently. Changes in research methods are accepted and discussed, but the technical underpinnings that influence human and social interactions and create different cultural contexts are ignored.

Hine (2000) points out that “using the Internet meaningfully is about acquiring the cultural competences within which it makes sense” (p. 152). As part of understanding the “natural setting” that Denzin and Lincoln (2000) refer to, it is not only necessary for the researcher to understand the cultural codes within virtual communities but also to be able to cross the boundaries of virtual environments into the technical sphere located in digital onground realities. For ethical research to be conducted online, this would mean considering the effects of the research on participants from their online, onground and technical situatedness. For example, when a study that is conducted primarily in the virtual environment and a member of this community is quoted in the research text—whose identity needs to be protected? The online persona? The onground person? And how much does the researcher need to alter the text quoted in a document for it to become unrecognizable by search engines? The previous practice of quoting a participant’s words by using a synonym may not be sufficient anymore, when considering the interplay of online, onground and technical contexts of this research. What are the specific characteristics of the Internet that create different forms of human and social interactions and innovative research spaces and forms?

As one of the author’s experience lies within research conducted primarily through virtual spaces (interviews, survey and ethnographic observations) and researcher-participant interactions, which were conducted primarily online, the following section will highlight the unique characteristics of the Internet that enable different forms of researcher-participant interactions within primarily online research contexts.

INTERNET CHARACTERISTICS AND CHANGES IN HUMAN INTERACTIONS

One of the issues most challenging in writing this chapter was to be conscious of the technical sphere informing human interactions as well as human interactions informing the technical sphere—to demonstrate the dynamic interplay of spheres instead of easily falling into technologically-deterministic language. For the purposes of this section, however, we only focus on what characterizes the virtual space and how this technologically-mediated space enables different forms of human interactions within this space.

De Kerckhove (1997) points out that the three characteristics of the Internet, “connectivity, interactivity and hypertextuality,” build the basis for a sense of “webbedness” among users, which is characterized by the “mental linking of people” or the “industries of networks” (p. xxv). Technical features, such as digital data transfer, networked environments and hypertext, enable a sense of connectivity and interactivity among frequent users. These characteristics are crucial for the Internet “… to have
multiple spatial and temporal orderings” (Hine, 2000, p. 114), which in turn impact forms of human and social interactions online.

Interactivity and connectivity involve information that is moved in many ways: simultaneously, quickly and in a distributed manner. In networked environments, the pattern of power is described as being less hierarchical than onground and more distributed than linear. The power does not lie primarily within hierarchical institutions but is distributed among networked dynamic local and global interactions with new emerging organizational structures (Castells, 1996, 1997; Dobell & Neufeld, 1994). Hyperlinks and electronic mail, for example, enable people to link to each other immediately, locally and globally, asynchronously and synchronously. Consequently, time and place shift in relevance: people begin expecting quick answers to e-mail, to reach anybody at anytime and to be able to access online information 24 hours a day. Digital data transfers enable a quicker and more immediate transfer of information than previous forms of mail or fax. In comparison to traditional data storage possibilities, digital data information is easily stored and replicated. Records of all interactions are easily kept and traced. This differs from onground access to information where linearity of communication patterns is common. Convenience, accessibility, speed and interactivity are dynamics of online interactions that are commonly expected by online users (Storey, Philips, Maczewski, & Wang, 2002).

In addition, text-based environments have taken away some cues of physical interactions on which many initial judgments and assumptions are made in onground worlds. Missed physical cues, for example, gender, age and ethnicity, mean that people explore their identities and experience themselves in different ways. A different sense of identity and embodiment is facilitated, which promotes a shifting in power structures among people interacting (e.g., O’Brien, 1999; Turkle, 1995).

These Internet characteristics and resulting changes in human interaction patterns play out in research contexts and have implications for ethical research conduct as well. Important issues, such as access, privacy, informed consent, intellectual property and confidentiality, are discussed by other authors (e.g., Buchanan, 2000; Eysenbach & Till, 2001; Nosek, Banaji & Greenwald, 2002; Sharf, 1999; Suler, 2000). This chapter focuses more specifically on aspects of researcher-participant relationships in online qualitative research: participant recruitment, data collection, voice and trust.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCHER-PARTICIPANT RELATIONSHIPS**

In qualitative studies “researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. … They seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 8). To do so, the researcher-participant relationships are of central importance in qualitative inquiries. As described above, the cultural, Internet-mediated contexts of researcher-participant relationships have expanded and now include issues located in technical and online spheres as well.
Recruitment of Participants

The researcher is initially faced with the task of understanding how participant recruitment is changed within Internet-mediated environments. Using the Internet to recruit participants enables the researcher to use new forms of accessing and recruiting, leading to both successes and frustrations (e.g., Bampton & Cowton, 2002; Holge-Hazelton, 2002).

In Maczewski’s (1999) study with young people, the impact of hyperlinks on the recruitment of participants became clear early on and quickly alerted the researcher to the implications of interactivity and connectivity. Maczewski’s aim was to recruit frequent Internet users between the ages of 13 and 19 with an active presence on the Web (e.g., youth who have designed a personal website, acted as a chathost, etc.). After having become aware of their online involvement, the question became: How did the researcher interact with them and interest them in becoming participants? In accordance with de Kerckhove’s (1997) three characteristics, Maczewski recognized that the shift from on-ground to online participant recruitment also meant a shift from linear distribution and control over information to an environment of immediately accessible information sources that enabled potential participants to gain access to information at their time and leisure. She had initially planned to contact participants linearly through engaging in an asynchronous e-mail dialogue (as compared to a person-to-person environment), and revealing information step-by-step depending on the participant and his/her expressed interest. Upon entering the online environment, having information about the research project available to participants 24 hours a day now seemed appropriate. (All relevant information about the research project and researcher was placed on a Web information page as a resource for participants.) This enabled participants, after the researcher’s initial contact by e-mail that included the information website’s URL, to access the project information 24/7, to follow hyperlinks to more background information on the researcher and research project, depending on their interest, and to gain an understanding of the project without directly engaging with the researcher. Using a website as a primary information source allowed potential participants to respond in their own time, allowing for individual reflection on whether to participate or not, without the added pressure of engaging directly with the researcher. The environment of hypertextuality, interactivity and connectivity had now shifted control over what parts of information to access at what time from the researcher toward the participant.

Even prior to this step, however, the website design became an important factor in the recruitment of participants. Instead of a voice on the phone, the website now provided the first impression of the project and the researcher for the participants. Information design through text and images now conveyed the research project without personal contact and raised questions of inclusion and exclusion. Although information was accessible 24/7, what information and in what form did the researcher choose to present online? For example, if the researcher only chose clip art that represented males, it would be possible that females felt excluded. The website color choices may appeal to specific groups of people. The text style may attract or exclude certain groups of young people. Information design guidelines (Mullet & Sano, 1995) were a powerful tool in not only recruiting participants but also in establishing a respectful relationship with the participant. This was taken into account when considering the websites’ design, text and structure and the presentation of information on the Web in appropriate and respectful
ways. Technical knowledge of website design, knowledge of website conventions, as well as awareness of onground assumptions and online styles of interaction all played out in this initial research step. Mann and Stewart (2000) point out that the action of researchers and participants referring each other to their respective websites is part of creating a trusting relationship. The website design becomes a “social action which has meaning to them [the designers] and which they consider will have meaning for its recipients” (Hine, 2000, p. 148). As Hine continues:

“...this competence involves the conceptualization of the Web page as a means of communicating with an audience, the ability to read the temporal collage of the Web and to negotiate the space of flows, and the ability to produce appropriate displays of authenticity” (p. 148).

Understanding the Web page as a form of social action is one aspect of demonstrating cultural competence in Internet-mediated relations within the interplay of the technical, online and onground.

Data Collection

Data collection in online qualitative research presents issues for reflection that are located primarily in the technical sphere. A significant issue to be considered by the researcher is the “agency” of the technology used and how this can affect researcher-participant relations. What capabilities does the technology being used have? Although data collection tools are programmed and controlled by researchers and technicians, not all capabilities of the tool may be initially transparent to the users. Moor (2000) suggests that:

“The invisibility factor [of computer technology] presents us with a dilemma. We are happy in one sense that the operations of a computer are invisible. We don’t want to inspect every computerized transaction or program every step for ourselves or watch every computer calculation. In terms of efficiency the invisibility factors is a blessing. But it is just this invisibility that makes us vulnerable. We are open to invisible abuse or invisible programming or inappropriate values or invisible miscalculation” (p. 33).

This invisibility of technological features is discussed in Storey, Philips and Maczewski’s (2001) study of Web-based learning tools in which students were asked to evaluate the tools by completing three online surveys. In the signed consent form, students agreed to provide information by completing these three surveys. However, during the course of the study they discovered that the tool had also collected information on student’s tool use as well as the date and time of use. This information would have been useful in relating the students’ opinion of the tool to the amount of time they had spent using the tool. The information was discarded as no consent had been obtained to gather this information. In this case the time to learn all of the technical capabilities of the new tool had been limited and this tool’s capability was missed. Theoretically, these kinds of capabilities could also be employed purposefully without knowledge of the participants.

Invisibility also plays a significant role in issues arising from data storage. Traditionally, the human subjects research approval form may only say that data is stored in
a “locked filing cabinet.” How does this apply to electronic data? Electronic data is stored on at least one computer, a server may automatically conduct backups and e-mails may be read by institutional observers, trying to hinder misuse of their system. As part of ethical research, it would be important to address appropriate ways of designing data collection tools, storing electronic data and monitoring the pathways it takes. This kind of invisibility and its possibilities of collecting data without users’ knowledge are very problematic and raise ethical issues. Whose responsibility is it to ensure this doesn’t happen? The tool designers or the tool users?

The Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct (1992) presents some guidance for computing professionals, but what can be expected of social scientists and their institutional affiliations in this respect? What institutional policies are being developed to address these issues? What do participants need to know about how electronic data is kept safe and confidential? What is safe and confidential in a digital, networked environment? These issues need to be further discussed and reflected in ethical research guidelines for technologically-mediated research studies.

Data Use and Ownership

Data use and ownership are further important issues to consider. Digitalization of data allows for simple manufacturing and distribution of multiple data copies. For example, when Maczewski (1999) conducted interviews on ICQ, she realized that both the researcher and participant could save a copy of the interview transcript. This was an interesting dilemma for the researcher, as the consent form had only specified how the researcher would use and protect the data. What were the participants’ responsibilities in regards to data use? Would the participant consider posting the data on her personal website? Would she post parts of it on a bulletin board? How would this influence the research study? In this case, the researcher negotiated with the participant to not use the data in any form before the completion of the researcher’s thesis. This was based on a trusting relationship, not on any consent form signed prior to the research process.

The technical possibilities of easy duplication, the online cultural contexts of interactivity and connectivity enabling many people to access this information once posted as well as researcher’s and participants’ on-ground interests needed to be recognized and negotiated within these contexts. Ideally, having recognized the interplay of the three research spheres and their implications for data collection, ownership, use, storage and accessibility would be negotiated prior to the research being conducted. Consent forms need to address the above issues and reflect the technological influences on data collection and storage.

It can be seen how the technology used adds further ethical dimensions into the research process. We consider the researchers’ knowledge of tools and further Internet technical capabilities as crucial in conducting ethical research with participants and again an important element in building a trusting relationship with research participants. Many technical features of the Internet and of the tools used may initially be invisible to the researcher and/or the participants but need to be transparent in order for all research members to consent fully to the research process. So far, technologies used in qualitative research, such as tape recorders and video cameras, seem to have been more transparent to the participant and the researcher than computer-mediated technologies.
With digital technologies and their “invisibility factor,” the handling of technologies used becomes a significant part of the conduct of ethical online qualitative research.

**Trust and Voice**

*Trust*

As can be seen from the above sections, researcher-participant relations in Internet-mediated environments are altered and influenced by changed parameters of interaction. The interplay of the three research spheres also has implications for the concepts of trust, voice and power within these relations. For example, technological mediation removes the traditionally present physical cues of onground personal identity, such as age, race and gender. Turkle (1995) elaborately describes how virtual spaces allow for the experience of and play with multiple identities. The possibility of multiple identities online introduces new complexities into the building of trusting relationships. As Lincoln (1985) points out:

“The building of trust is a developmental task; trust is not something that suddenly appears after certain matters have been accomplished, but something to be worked on day to day. Moreover, trust is not established once and for all; it is fragile and even trust that has been a long time building can be destroyed overnight in the face of an ill-advised action” (p. 257).

How does this apply within online contexts when multiple identities are in play and physical identity markers are lacking? Several authors describe how trusting relationships are built online, for example, by replacing onground identity markers by relational processes, such as being open about the research project, disclosing information about oneself and using humor and tone of written text to convey personality and empathy (Baym, 2000; Mann & Stewart, 2000; Markham, 1998; Holge-Hazelton, 2002). These processes promote the building of a trusting relationship with participants—but how does the researcher “really” know with which participant identities they are interacting? Is this important and does it matter? For example, when Maczewski (1999) interviewed young people online and felt that a relationship had been built through their continuous interaction, the researcher was sure that in their physical lives they were actually young people. The different cues and dynamics of their conversations that led her to believe that these were young people still remain somewhat unclear to her. It leaves her to wonder whether it would have been possible for a 65 year old to play such a fantastic youth online and whether she could have been convincingly deceived. What implications for their relationship and the research project would this have had, if the participant’s portrayed online age was different from their real age?

The concept of trust within online relationships is tightly interwoven among online and onground spheres. Researchers’ and participants’ identities onground, the focus of the research study (onground youth) and interactions in virtual spaces with chosen online identities made for a complex set of characteristics influencing the relation to each other.

Nosek, Banaji and Greenwald (2002) point out how the researcher’s presence may hinder participants from withdrawing from the study. Online the researcher’s presence is less immediate and barriers to ending the relationship therefore are perceived as lower. As with participant recruitment, a shift of power from researcher to participant can be seen.
Hine (2000) points out that researchers have to familiarize themselves with the cultural contexts into which they are entering when conducting research online. This local cultural knowledge should be acquired by the researcher to promote the building of trusting and respectful relationships with participants. If this is not done, there are many examples of how participants react negatively if a researcher does not understand the cultural codes of the research environment. For example, virtual community members may feel that their privacy has been invaded, when a researcher has not made her or his presence and intent known (Eysenbach & Till, 2001). Mann and Stewart (2000) describe how netiquette or “standards of politeness and courtesy” (p. 59) appropriate to the specific online environment are expected by users and present a beginning of an ethical framework for conducting online qualitative research.

*Voice*

Issues of trust are also linked with issues of voice. Within different parameters of building trusting relationships, participants’ voices also need to be recognized within these same parameters. Hertz (1997) describes voice as “a struggle to figure out how to present the author’s self while simultaneously writing the respondents’ accounts and representing their selves” (p. xi). The question arises of which voices are presented when multiple identities are experienced online and onground by both researcher and participants. For example, participants in Maczewski’s study expressed that it was easier to voice their opinions online, because they did not have to face the threat of rejection as severely as onground or of people judging them by external appearances alone:

- **M**: so what is it about online, that makes you be more open?
- **Ky**: well, it varies from person to person, reasons for opening up…
- **Ky**: a lot of people are shy IRL, and not having to look someone in the eye really benefits them, makes them feel more self-assured.
- **Ky**: with me, it’s more of my deep-rooted poetic love… I read into things a lot more, I like to be able to express myself.
- **Ky**: Also, it’s not that split-second judgment thing… I tend to get a few gawks IRL…hehe
- **Ky**: whereas online, it’s all about the message, and not about the image… (Maczewski, 1999, p. 143)

In this example, Ky’s onground voice is different from her online voice, as she is more open online. This is an example of how respondents’ voices are negotiated among researcher, participants and technology within the interplay of all three spheres. Joinson (2002) concurs that sometimes a higher level of self-disclosure is experienced in online than in person-to-person interviews.

Returning to the example of interacting with youth online, if a 65 year old could have a convincing youth voice online and his onground age was discovered later on, which voice would the researcher then have prioritized in this context? The physical reality? The youth voice online? In recognition of multiple voices that people own, would acknowledging the youthful voice of a 65 year old be credible in research contexts researching youth experiences? Who has voice, what is voice and how voice(s) can be represented in technologically-mediated contexts are critical questions that require further research.
Conducting Congruent, Ethical, Qualitative Research

Representing multiple voices in linear texts is challenging. Perhaps technologically-mediated environments could offer new opportunities for representing multiple, simultaneous voices. If the research medium allows for direct connectivity and interactivity through hypertexts, perhaps it would be possible to more directly include participants in presenting research findings and to illuminate multiple voices more easily than traditionally has been the case. Would it be a future role of the researcher to connect people with each other, if further knowledge would emerge from these connections? For example, with participants’ consent, presenting research findings on a Web page with contact links to participants, allowing readers to directly ask further questions of research participants, could be considered. Perhaps more advanced visualization tools will be developed to assist representation of networks of research findings. Whether these changed parameters of interaction in text-based environments will be lost and missed physical cues for interaction reappear with the emergence of newer technologies, such as Voice over Internet Protocol, video data or digital pictures, remains to be seen.

Trust, Voice and Confidentiality

Issues of trust and voice online are further intertwined with notions of “confidentiality” and “anonymity,” yet the understanding of these notions within the cultural contexts of Internet-mediated research is a complex issue. Some research participants may already have a diary of their personal life online with much of the same information as presented in a research interview. Using a synonym, for example, would not protect a participant from harm, if the reader could search the Web for interview excerpts and easily identify the page. Similar to young people using the Web to express their personal opinions as a means of empowerment and exploration of identities (Chu, 1997; Maczewski, 2002), a sense of power could perhaps be experienced by participants in acknowledging participation in a research setting. This could be achieved, for example, by transcripts being published online on participants’ websites, on a common project website or the researchers’ website, or by creating links among participants’ websites. In networked, technologically mediated environments, there is the potential to build a different form of researcher-participant interactions in which connectivity assists the efforts of the researcher in more immediate collaboration with the participant and through different conceptualizations of confidentiality. A different form of coming to know research findings may emerge by readers exploring linked data, rather than reading text the researcher has composed (Brewer & Maczewski, 2001). How and if this would be appropriate, what form of understanding “confidentiality” and “anonymity” in contexts of interactivity, connectivity and the dynamic interaction of online and onground identities are important ethical issues for further discussion.

DEVELOPING GUIDELINES FOR CONDUCTING ETHICAL ONLINE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

As has been demonstrated, the ethics of Internet-mediated research are located in the intersection of the online, onground and technical spheres. This intersection is characterized by interactivity, connectivity and hypertextuality and changed researcher-
participant relationships. Within this interplay, the researcher is faced with the question of how to ethically conduct research that is congruent within these parameters.

Oberg (2001) suggests that in congruent research, the researcher is connected to the research topic, assessment criteria, methodology choice and epistemological assumptions. According to Oberg, continuous researcher reflexivity and mindfulness are important aspects of enabling researchers’ awareness of their own assumptions and facilitating congruent research practices. When conducting Internet-mediated research, we believe these practices of congruent research to be applicable and relevant for enabling ethical research practices. Congruent, ethical online research would not depend on the researcher using onground methods online, but the researcher showing awareness of changes in cultural contexts and the implications for researcher-participant interactions. An entry point for a researcher to conduct qualitative research online would be for him/her to reflect on and answer the following questions about the research study:

1. What are the cultural contexts of the research project?
2. What kinds of technologies are used?
3. How will the interplay of online, onground and technical spheres impact the research project?
4. What are the changes in human and social interactions that occur through the specific technologies used?
5. Are my assumptions about research processes applicable within the technologically mediated research contexts?
6. Do research concepts need to be redefined to fit within new cultural contexts?
7. What changes in ethical implications arise?

These questions aim to make visible the connectedness of the online, onground and virtual research spheres. Congruent research can then be conducted when the researcher understands the complex levels of interplay of the three research spheres and adjusts the research practices used in accordance with the defining characteristics of interactivity, connectivity and hypertextuality.

As general principles for researchers, we would suggest that before conducting Internet-mediated research:

1. The researcher develops and demonstrates awareness of the specific Internet-mediated research contexts—how human and social online interactions are shaped by the medium of the Internet, differ from onground interactions and how this impacts online research processes.
2. The researcher develops and demonstrates awareness of required technological skills for operating hard- and software, including data analysis tools, to adequately conduct the research project.
3. The researcher develops and demonstrates research practices (e.g., building trusting relationships) that are congruent with the medium in which research is conducted.

In addition to the researcher personally reflecting on the above questions and gaining appropriate skills, some ethical guidelines exist that address issues raised. For example, the ACM Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct (1992) is an example of ethical guidelines that take computing technology into account. Boehlefeld (1996) discusses
how ACM guidelines can be useful for social science researchers, for example, by considering computer professionals’ responsibility to share their understanding of the technology with the public. This may address concerns of privacy and anonymity. For the social sciences ethical guidelines for conducting Internet research are in the process of being discussed and established (e.g., Ess, 2002; Eysenbach & Till, 2001; Jones, 1999a; Mann & Stewart, 2000).

THE FUTURE?

The processes of conducting Internet-mediated research have been discussed within today’s contexts of western information societies and recognition of the novelty of Internet research for social scientists. As new technologies are rapidly developing, what different research conceptualizations and methodologies will emerge in the future? New technological media enhance processes as well as render others obsolete (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988), for example, electronic mail reduces the need for surface mail. This dynamic leaves researchers to ponder not only which new research practices emerge but also which research practices are lost. For example, if ethnographic studies moved to explore the connections of linkages instead of in-depth field research (Wittel, 2000), what insights would be gained or lost? Qualitative research in virtual reality caves will also prove to be fascinating and yet again leave us with further complex ethical issues and show different nuances of researcher-participant relations. For example, if human physical processes, such as excitement, sadness or joy, could be externalized and projected onto screens, what research practices need to be reconceptualized in order to conduct ethical research? To ensure that technologically-mediated qualitative research is conducted in ethical ways, research practices will continually need to be critically evaluated within their unique contexts.

REFERENCES


**ENDNOTES**

1 The term “onground” is used instead of “in real life” to convey physical, material communities as the authors consider both online and onground events as part of “real life.”

2 Oberg (2001) observed students engaged in qualitative research and found that their research process excelled when “the [research] topic becomes the method through which the topic is pursued.” For example, when studying mindfulness, mindfulness became an integral research method for the research process. This occurrence Oberg named “congruence.” Similarly, we believe, in online qualitative research, technological capabilities and their interactions become important aspects of research methods and are integral parts of conducting ethical research. Although absolute congruency is not necessary to conduct ethical research, expanding the scope of ethical research practices to reflect characteristics of human interactions within Internet-mediated environments is necessary.

3 We realize that given the wide range of topics described here, each topic is addressed relatively briefly. More in-depth reflection and analysis of each point raised are important issues for further research.

4 ICQ is a widely accessible software that enables chats. For more information, see http://www.icq.com.

5 For further reading on the process of data analysis with computer software, see Gibbs, Friese & Mangabeira (2002) as a starting point.

6 For a further discussion on the implications of a shift to hypertext analysis, see Moes (2000).

7 VoiP is a means of transmitting voice using the Internet protocol, rather than the telephone network.

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