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[1] 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[2] within 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

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