Chapter XIV

Fact or Fiction: Notes of a Man Interviewing Women Online

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines conditions that participants of online qualitative research might give false answers to a researcher. As research was conducted with feminist activists who were online, a number of the responses were highly suspect as to how true they could actually be. Because the researcher was not face to face with these participants, he had to either take the responses as true or discard them. The researcher argues his lack of face-to-face presence made it difficult to generate a good rapport with these participants, and because of this, received answers based on the only social marker that was evident: his name, or that he was male. Interview data is presented to show apparent discrepancies in our electronic conversations. The chapter concludes by suggesting for future online qualitative research, the researcher should have a more reflexive research design and approach to the project.

INTRODUCTION

In late 2000, I found myself developing a research project that would compare two social movement groups: one that exists in cyberspace and one that exists in the physical world. I thought my research design was pretty straightforward: I would be interviewing feminist activists in these two different social spaces. My thought process led me to believe that my (yet-to-be determined) participants would be eager and willing to talk with me about their activism. After all, people love to talk about themselves, my optimism told me. As I was finalizing my design, nowhere did I question how my role as a researcher or a man would play out in this. With the online social movement group, I could utilize my years of writing tactful e-mails to interview these participants, even when the subject matter (politics) could, at times, be touchy. This lack of insight might have been a mistake. I was treated differently and the responses that I received could have been fabricated. In retrospect, I should have taken into account more about myself than I did.

Qualitative research methods, such as participant observation, the interview and content analysis, are all subject to different methodologies when looking at cyberspace because of the absence of a face-to-face presence the researcher typically has with participants. This chapter addresses the cyberspace interview. I explore the trials and tribulations that occur when conducting the interview in a strictly online environment, in this case, e-mail. My interviewees gave what I suspected were tailored responses, given that I presented myself online as a man, which I am, and asked them about feminist activism. I end the chapter with a discussion of a proposed solution to the perils I describe below: the reflexive study of cyberculture and cyberspace.

I conducted interviews in the spring of 2001, from (late) January to (early) April. My purpose was to examine whether or not an online feminist activist group had the ability to create a collective identity in the same fashion that a traditional social movement could, as the social movement literature describes[1]. I did a comparative study of one offline social movement group to a social movement group that existed in cyberspace. When researching the online group, I made initial contacts to 15 potential participants, with a total of five people agreeing to participate.

After receiving the e-signed institutional review board consent forms, I began interviewing these activists. E-mail was my last resort; I gave them the option to do the interview over the phone (on my tab), as well as the option to use instant messenger (IM), which I knew would provide the opportunity to have a "real time" conversation. Unsurprisingly, not one of the participants accepted my offer for the phone interviews, and as (bad) luck would have it, none of the participants used IM. So, I forged on with my only option: e-mail.

In the beginning, the participants replied with answers in a timely fashion. Rarely did I have to wait more than a few days to receive a reply. I always asked follow-up questions, as well as clarifying questions, when appropriate, to ensure I received the most accurate answers.

The back-and-forth e-mail continued for approximately three months. As the study progressed, the time I waited for responses increased as well. I had no explanation for why this was happening. But I did not want to risk any potential losses of participants, so I sat idle. The idleness led me to question my own responses to these women. Was I offensive in some shape or fashion? Was at any point, I being insensitive in my word choice or questioning? I found myself reading and rereading e-mails that I had already

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