

Chapter XXIV

Multitasking CMC to Study Connected Organizations

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ABSTRACT

The rapid diffusion of computer mediated communication (CMC) is redefining how individuals relate in contemporary 'networked' organizations. This chapter discusses the utility of pairing two forms of digital data collection, network analysis and electronic interviewing, to explore the structure and meaning of communication at the individual and organization level. Research methods are reviewed independently, and then presented together for consideration as a mixed approach. To demonstrate utility and challenge, a structural analysis of hyperlinks among college student group Web sites is paired with electronically conducted interviews. Howard's (2002) network ethnography is discussed as a conceptual framework. Unique challenges and suggested ways of overcoming them are also presented.

INTRODUCTION

The diffusion of individualized computer mediated communications (CMC) among today's college students has led to such labels as "Net Generation" (Carlson, 2005) or "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001). Even e-mail is becoming historic with contemporary students, who see it as a way to communicate with "old people" (Carnevale, 2006). More asynchronous connections maintained through text messaging and social network software allow students to reject time, place, and space considerations, in favor of flexibility. Add

e-mail and cell phones and students become hyper-connected nodes negotiating transitions between personal social networks of support (peers, family), academic responsibility (classmates, faculty, administrators), and extracurricular activities (clubs and organizations).

Today's student organizations are made up of CMC-reliant individuals who may share their time between several groups competing for their time commitment and contribution. To survive, the form and function of the contemporary student organization is moving online with its membership. This trend creates significant challenges

for researchers relying on traditional, in-person field-based methods to study connected individuals within connected organizations.

Studying the online habits of college students can provide valuable insight into future online trends of the general population (Jones, 2002). The purpose of this chapter is to present the use of two distinct research methods, network analysis and electronic interviewing, to enhance the study of networked individuals and online organizations. To demonstrate use and challenges, a network analysis of hyperlinks among student group Web sites is paired with electronically conducted interviews. The results of the case study analysis are limited to allow for a discussion of challenges and suggestions for overcoming limitations in mixed method CMC research designs. Howard's (2002) network ethnography, integrating network and qualitative methods, is presented as a conceptual framework.

BACKGROUND

Network Ethnography

Utilizing e-mail, cell phones, instant messaging (IM), and other Web-accessible wireless communications, individual relations have transcended proximity boundaries to emerge in boundless communities of networked individuals (Wellman, 2001a, 2001b). To study the structure and impact of communication within such groups, network scholars have advocated social network analysis (Garton, Haythornthwaite, & Wellman, 1997; Wellman, 2001a). Qualitative Internet researchers (Hine, 2000; Mann & Stewart, 2000; Miller & Slater, 2001) have concurrently advocated virtual ethnography methods to explore meaning and understanding among computer-mediated communication (CMC) users in virtual contexts.

Taken individually, Howard (2002) argues that neither network nor qualitative approaches, singularly conducted, permit meaningful analy-

sis of CMC-latent organizations. His primary criticisms of ethnographic methods stem from sample selection. Relying on traditional models of participant selection introduces inappropriate bias. Also, ethnographic methods do not allow the researcher to situate the community under study within a larger social context.

Similarly limited, social network analysis exposes only the paths of communication, the routes of passage, and the strengths of association, but does not consider meaning or impact for its users. As a methodology, it identifies positioning, but is unsuited to assess why positions are significant to the organization or to the organization's culture.

To effectively study hypermedia organizations, groups that use various forms of CMC to carry out their missions and activities over large areas and in different time zones, Howard (2002) suggested pairing network analysis with forms of qualitative inquiry, defining a network ethnography perspective. There are several notable aspects of this approach (pp. 561-562):

1. The meaning of field sites is adapted and chosen through important nodes in the social network instead of territorially.
2. Sampling bias is reduced by the identification of the most significant informants from the social network, permitting more theoretical sampling through strategic selection of entry into a community, avoiding the less-manageable aspects of traditional ethnographic sampling techniques.
3. Key organizations, events, and people can be identified for in-depth research and interview through a social networks analysis from the universe of cases.
4. Community change and the passage of ideas can be more precisely mapped over time by the researcher.

Discussing the limitations of studying CMC-latent organizations using only one methodology,

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