
Chapter VI

When the Ethic is Functional to the Method: The Case of E-Mail Qualitative Interviews

Nadia Olivero
University of Milan - Bicocca, Italy

Peter Lunt
University College London, UK

ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the methodological implications of using e-mail for qualitative interviews. It draws on computer-mediated communication (CMC) literature to remark that, contrary to generalized assumptions, technological-based anonymity does not always correspond to increased self-disclosure. Conversely, it is shown that e-mail interviews make the interviewer effect unavoidable, stimulate reflexivity and must rely on trust and equal participation more than face-to-face interviews. To address the interviewee's resistance and avoid unwanted phenomena of strategic self-presentation, a model of interview based on a feminist ethic is proposed.

INTRODUCTION

For many social scientists the Internet has become a time saving and cost effective medium for conducting empirical research. The use of the Internet for data collection raises, however, a number of methodological and ethical issues. Although at first the

issue appeared to be whether the Internet transformed research practices, more recently there is developing consensus on the need to identify guidelines that are specific to electronic communication.

Quantitative researchers have answered the call for studies on Internet methodology promptly. Several papers investigated issues of questionnaire design and distribution (e.g., Batinic, 1997; Kaplan, 1992; Kiesler & Sproull, 1986; Swoboda, Muehlberger, Weitkunat, & Schneeweiss, 1997; Witmer, Colman, & Katzman, 1999), compared content and response rate of e-mail surveys to mail-based surveys (Kittleson, 1995; Metha & Sivadas, 1995; Paolo, Bonaminio, Gibson, Partridge, & Kallail, 2000) and identified strategies to increase the response rates in electronic media (Kittleson, 1997; Schaefer & Dillman, 1998). On the other hand, ethical considerations are often a main concern for qualitative researchers. Studies adopting participant observation and discourse analysis to investigate spontaneous communication over the Internet raise awareness of the need to conform to principles of research ethics. The ease of access to Internet users' discourses, together with the increased opportunity for the researcher to copy, store and quickly disseminate data, emphasize to a greater extent than ever before issues of privacy, informed consent and narrative appropriation (e.g., Glaser, Dixit, & Green, 2002; Sharf, 1999).

However, qualitative methods that involve interaction between the participant and the researcher introduce additional issues for the design of research guidelines. For instance, the conduct of qualitative interviews over the Internet requires taking into account dynamics of interpersonal communication and processes of meaning construction that are computer-mediated, and, therefore, dependent on the way people interact with the technology. In this chapter we focus on the use of e-mail for qualitative interviews, and in particular on the implications of establishing interview relationships based on written, asynchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC).

The existing literature on e-mail interviews assesses practical advantages and disadvantages by observing differences between face-to-face (FTF) and e-mail communication. Among the advantages, authors pointed out overcoming time and geographical constraints (Foster, 1994), easily eluding transcriptions and related errors (Olivero & Lunt, 2001; Selwyn & Robson, 1998) and avoiding interviewer effects or problems with shy participants. The main limitation appears to be the lack of non-verbal cues, such as body language, physical appearance, and voice qualities (cf. Bampton & Cowton, 2002; Fontana & Frey, 2000; Selwyn & Robson, 1998).

If the lack of non-verbal cues reduces the interview material that is normally available for interpretation, then the sense of protection that results from physical anonymity seems to increase the willingness to disclose. In an e-mail interview study on diabetes sufferers, it was noted that rapport was easily established and that, compared to face-to-face interviews, respondents were less inhibited and willing to talk about highly personal topics (Holge-Hazelton, 2002). Nevertheless, previous research also pointed to the potential lack of spontaneity, which might be fostered by asynchronous communication, and generally to difficulties due to the lack of control over the participation of the interviewee (Olivero, 2001; Olivero & Lunt, 2001). In these studies it was found that, for retaining the interviewee and maintaining participation, the adoption of an interview style oriented to constructing a gratifying rapport was more effective than the use of financial incentives alone (Olivero, 2001; Olivero & Lunt, 2001).

11 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage: www.igi-global.com/chapter/when-ethic-functional-method/28295

Related Content

From Synergy to Symbiosis: New Directions in Security and Privacy?

Vasilios Katos, Frank Stowell and Peter Bednar (2009). *International Journal of Information Technologies and Systems Approach* (pp. 1-14).

www.irma-international.org/article/synergy-symbiosis-new-directions-security/4023

Consumer Adoption of PC-Based/Mobile-Based Electronic Word-of-Mouth

Akinori Ono and Mai Kikumori (2018). *Encyclopedia of Information Science and Technology, Fourth Edition* (pp. 6019-6030).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/consumer-adoption-of-pc-basedmobile-based-electronic-word-of-mouth/184302

An Adaptive CU Split Method for VVC Intra Encoding

Lulu Liu and Jing Yang (2023). *International Journal of Information Technologies and Systems Approach* (pp. 1-17).

www.irma-international.org/article/an-adaptive-cu-split-method-for-vvc-intra-encoding/322433

Sense and Boundaries of Computer Simulations

Georgios O. Papadopoulos and Apostolos Syropoulos (2021). *Encyclopedia of Information Science and Technology, Fifth Edition* (pp. 155-163).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/sense-and-boundaries-of-computer-simulations/260183

Competing Commitments Theory

John McAvoy and Tom Butler (2009). *Handbook of Research on Contemporary Theoretical Models in Information Systems* (pp. 336-347).

www.irma-international.org/chapter/competing-commitments-theory/35839