Web 2.0 in social science research

A Case Study in Blog Analysis

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Overview

Two projects:

- Student placement at the British Library May-August 2008:

  How are web 2.0 technologies being used by the social science research community? What are the implications for government and scholarly authority and research?

  Literature review and qualitative interviews with 15 social science researchers

- PhD research utilising blog analysis….

Blog Analysis Case Study

- "Framing the gap year"

    – Representations of gap year experiences

- How do young people present their gap year stories?

- Blogs as narratives

- Qualitative analysis

Image:
www.smileinternational.org

Defining Web 2.0

- Technical move to the Internet as a platform

- Greater participation and interaction between users centred on web content

- Interviewee definitions:
    - Growth in user-generated content
    - Democratic elements
    - Interactivity
    - Public / private distinctions effaced

Gap Year Study: Why Blogs?

- Practical advantages, e.g. access

- Wealth of data

- Unobtrusive

  – Unsolicited and naturalistic narratives

  – Own language and reflections

- How did the gappers 'frame' their accounts for an audience?

  – Extent of 'unprompted reflexivity' or accounts guided by 'pre-existing dispositions'?

Methodological issues

- Innovations and challenges

- Sampling and representation

- Internet populations

- Web 2.0 populations

  "Web 2.0 data sets still miss certain aspects of the phenomenon itself, such as the practices and behaviours of people who deliberately aren't involved or are indifferent"

- Sample sizes / combining methods

Methodological issues

- Authenticity

  – Identity play & presentation of self

  – Candidness online? Identity experimentation outdated?

  – Web 2.0 and everyday life

  – Concerns regarding the vulnerable

  – Authenticity 'offline'

Gap Year Study: Methodological Issues

- Who did it capture? Who was excluded?
  - Gap year *bloggers*
  - Alternative perspectives?
- New form of text
  - Text; pictures; video; comments; hyperlinks; audio; adverts
  - Dynamic
- Verifying identity
  - E.g. could not make conclusions regarding class background
  - But interest in gap year stories rather than 'accurate' account

Methodological Issues

- Evaluating social research
  - Two positions:
    - 'Offline' standards continue to apply
    - Questioned use of criteria

- Ensuring methods are 'fit for purpose', not:

  "… driven by technology rather than research goals"
  - Context of data collection

- Wider issues for social research methodologies

Ethical Issues: Privacy in Web 2.0

- Web 2.0: the personal as public

  "[A] log of daily life...   Reading people's diaries would have been impossible 5 years ago; you would have had to burgle their home. But if you want to read a million diaries today, you can do in MySpace"

  - Part of wider cultural shifts

- Subject or author?

  - Anonymity

  "… if people did not want to be associated with the content they post online, they would do this anonymously"

Ethical Issues: Privacy in Web 2.0

- Informed Consent
  - Implied consent?
  - Distinguishing between technically public and private
  - Gaining consent intrusive
- Ownership of information
  - Publically available data?

  "If people are making public postings about material it should be within our warrant as social scientists to be able to download that data and analyse it for its shape and form, as long as we try to minimise individual harm"

  - Awareness and perceptions
  - Responsibility

Gap Year Study: Ethical Issues

- Blogs as public or private data?
  - Representation of a person or text with author?
  - Tension between acknowledging authorship and protecting identity
- 'Personal but not private' (Hookway 2008: 105)
  - Non-sensitive
  - Data in public domain
  - Writing for an implicit audience
  - Informed consent not required
- Data anonymised
- Bruckman (2002): 'moderate disguise'

Ethical Issues: Privacy in Web 2.0

- Importance of context
  - 'Grey area'
  - Context-driven approach
  - Contingent factors
    - Assessing potential harm
    - Aggregation of data
    - Dissemination
  - Questions to consider – not blanket approach

- Government and commercial research

Additional Ethical Issues

- Ethical scrutiny
  - Current guidelines
  - Ethics committees
  - Resistance to rigid, bureaucratic framework
  - Disciplinary differences
- An ethics of Web 2.0
  - Altering relationship between researcher and researched
  - Transparency and trust
  - Existing ethical principles
  - 'Lowering the bar'

    "It's the same as non-Web research, the need for a set of questions to be applied to particular context, not straight-jacketing researchers into inappropriate ethical restrictions. Guidelines should facilitate good ethical practice rather than make the process bureaucratic"

Ethics: Some Conclusions

- Changing notions of privacy

- Differences of opinion regarding responsibility

- Importance of context

- Resistance to 'medicalisation'

- Establishing precedents

- Wider issues for social research ethics

- Useful but not restrictive

Gap Year Study: Practical Issues

- Searching for blogs

  – Blog search engines and blogging websites

  – Manual checking to construct sample

- Keeping track

- Managing blog data

  – Converted to text and imported into Atlas.ti

  – Problem: blogs are multimedia 'texts' ….

  – Over 1 million words!

Some conclusions

- Opportunity to explore everyday life in new and innovative ways
- Differences between online and offline possibly overstated
- Fit for purpose methods
- Opportunities and challenges
  - Sampling, managing data, analysis tools
- Key issue for ethics: defining what is public and what is private
- Context-driven ethics
- Further study of utility of existing guidelines and scrutiny
- Resistance to medicalisation / bureaucracy
- Knowledge and understanding of Web 2.0 environment
- Collaborations with other disciplines

References and further reading

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