Social Research Association Annual Conference:
‘Social Research in the Digital Age’

Deep Data:
Qualitative Approaches to E-Research in the Digital Age

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Topics for discussion...

What is “Deep Data”?

Opportunities for qualitative e-researchers.

Example: A digital approach to studying women e-entrepreneurs

Challenges

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What is “Deep Data”?

Through use of qualitative approaches in a data-rich online world, we can connect with participants anywhere to collect deep, rich data that allows us to generate new understandings of research phenomena.

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Opportunities for qualitative e-researchers:

- Learn from and ask questions to diverse, global participants.
- Generate and use visual data.
- Collect data anywhere, anytime, with computers, phone or mobile devices.

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Data Collection for Qualitative Research

**Interviews**
- In-depth responses to questions
- Data: verbatim quotations with context

**Observations**
- Fieldwork
- Data: notes and descriptions

**Document Analysis**
- Review of written records
- Data: excerpts

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Qualitative Data Collection Online

**Online Interviews**

- Synchronous interviews using text chat, multi-channel meeting spaces, videoconferencing or in 3-D immersive virtual worlds
- Asynchronous interviews via email, forums.

**Observations**

- External observer of online behaviors and activities.
- Participant observer in online activities.

**Document Analysis**

- Review of digital records, websites, blogs.

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Choosing to collect data with or about online communications.

Internet as subject of inquiry

- Use the Internet to study online behaviors, trends, attitudes, styles of usage, etc.

Internet as means of inquiry

- Use the Internet to communicate with research participants about any aspect of lived experience.
Re-think our approaches: From “virtual” to “digital.”

Richard Rogers distinguishes between what he calls *virtual* approaches, those that import traditional data collection methods online, from *digital* approaches that take advantage of the unique characteristics and capabilities of the Internet for research (Rogers, 2009, 2010).

Digital qualitative approaches require the researcher to do more than simply re-purpose real-world data collection techniques.

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Kvale (2007) suggested that as researchers we may act as *miners* who dig the data from participants, or *travelers* who journey with participants. I (2010) suggest that we may use the metaphor of the *gardener*: because we may need to do some digging, some cultivating, and some weeding.
Example: A *digital* approach to studying women e-entrepreneurs


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Data Collected Online

Briefly explain what technologies you use and how you use them.

Business to Business?

Business to Customer?

Data collected with online interviews and blog analysis.

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Interacting with participants to generate visual data...

Figure 4: Online interview with visual diagram

Figure 5: Participants’ Business Aspirations

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Exploration not only of how they behave online but
Themes emerged- food for future research!

- *Pull* is stronger than *Push*
- Creative/quality control is more important than business growth.
- Grow out, not up and down
- Women entrepreneurs make more entrepreneurs.
- Choice of Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) is made strategically.
- Choice of ICTs is made strategically.
- Free or cheap ICTs work.
- Choice of ICT depends on the nature of the relationship.
- ICTS can increase efficiency...or increase distractions.
- Intellectual property and data privacy are considerations when choosing/using ICTs.
- Plans for future ICT use include more use of media.
- Asynchronous or near-synchronous communications work
- Relationships matter, and they are sustained with regular communication.
- Direct communication leads to positive ROI.
Challenges for qualitative research online:

#1. Protecting human subjects and their multiple identities in cyberspace.

We all have different online identities—how should researchers respect and protect them?
No informed consent required for data collected through observation.

Public Online Environment

Open and accessible to all users to read or view.

Open to all users to read; free registration is required to post.

Free registration or membership is required to read or post.

Open to all users to read; membership or subscription fee is required to access some files, participate or post.

Access restricted to members or certain groups.

Private Online Environment

Information, file or application sharing, discussion or meeting available only to selected or invited participants.

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Challenge #3: New methods, old books and review policies.
E-Interview Research Framework

A framework to guide the research design and evaluation...

- Aligning Purpose and Design
- Choosing E-Interviews for the Study
- Handling Sampling & Recruiting
- Positioning the Researcher
- Determining E-Interview Style(s)
- Selecting ICT & Milieu
- Conducting the Interview
- Addressing Ethical Issues

Learn more at http://tinyurl.com/afddvwb

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References cited