Chapter I

The Choice
of Qualitative Methods
in IS Research

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INTRODUCTION

In this introductory chapter I set the stage for the remaining chapters by discussing factors that influence the choice of qualitative methods for information systems research. In doing so, I provide examples from my own work as well as that of other qualitative researchers in the IS field. I consider these influencing factors in order to highlight the interplay between methodological choices and the context within which they occur. Just as decisions about information systems need to be considered within their contexts of use, so too do choices about qualitative methods for information systems research.

In successive waves throughout my career, I have broadened the scope of the qualitative research methods I have chosen to use. In doing so, I have also expanded the range of issues I have had to confront. My qualitative research initially took the forms of case study and policy analysis as I followed the telecommunications privatization movement in the U.S. (Trauth 1979, 1986; Trauth, et al., 1983, 1991). The next stage of my journey began in 1989 when I was developing a research plan for a country-level case study of Ireland's emerging information economy. In this project the scope (the entire country), the level of

analysis (societal), and the interpretive nature of the research presented significant challenges. First, countrywide case studies are typically statistical studies.[1] Second, the organizational level of analysis is typical for published qualitative IS research. Third, this research project represented a shift from the more positivist use of qualitative methods in my policy analysis research to the interpretive use of qualitative methods for theory development.[2] For all these reasons I had little by way of exemplars in the IS field to guide me through the morass of methodological choices. After I chose an ethnographic approach, I was forced to extrapolate, as best I could, from examples in other fields.[3]

A new phase of my involvement with qualitative research methods began in 1997 when I was confronted with two new issues. One was adapting interpretive research methods for the virtual realm. I was particularly interested in the process of applying interpretive methods such as ethnography — which assumed both face-to-face data collection and extended periods of time in the field interacting with the research subjects — to study the behavior of virtual groups. This research led to the other issue: developing and assessing interpretive research methodologies. Whereas positivist research can appeal to established statistical tests to certify reliability and validity, interpretive information systems (IS) research has not had such a tradition. Until quite recently, there has been little available in the IS literature to guide the interpretive researcher. For these reasons I became interested in contributing to the development of a cumulative body of knowledge regarding the use and assessment of interpretive research.[4]

Throughout all these phases of my research career what I most often sought were examples to help show me the way. I wanted to see how others were engaging with research issues that were similar to mine, whether they were about the choice of appropriate method, the particulars of data collection and analysis associated with a given method, or finding appropriate evaluative criteria once the method was chosen. Unfortunately, I was often frustrated in my attempts to do so. The public discussion of qualitative methods in information systems research is fairly recent and heavily influenced by geography. The "Manchester Conference" on information systems research is generally viewed as initiating the discussion (Mumford et al., 1985). Another European conference held in Copenhagen in 1990 (Nissen et al., 1991) continued the discussion of qualitative methods and deepened the

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