



Chapter X

Challenges to Qualitative Researchers in Information Systems

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INTRODUCTION

A conventional “trends” chapter on qualitative research in information systems (IS) would review the state of the art (the methods and findings) of such research, laud its achievements, criticize its shortcomings, and then specify what it should do in the future to add to its achievements and rectify its shortcomings. However, I will write this chapter unconventionally instead, so that the reader will be able to gain a sense of my own engagement with issues in qualitative IS research. Furthermore, although the editor of this volume originally commissioned me to write a chapter on trends, the chapter has evolved as a critical commentary on qualitative IS research. The chapter’s turn in this direction resulted from the editor’s guidance to me about how to account for the comments of the anonymous reviewers of the initial draft.

I will proceed unconventionally in three ways. First, I will write in the first person, where my reason for doing so is not simply that the first-

le is gaining acceptance in academic prose, but also that my the first person will, in itself, serve throughout this chapter as a continual reminder of my ontological belief about the nature of research and knowledge. I reject the naïve objectivist ontology that scientific knowledge exists or can be made to exist independently of knowing subjects. My belief is that all knowledge is a human creation and a human possession. In the same way that qualitative researchers often describe an organization, a custom, or a social practice as a socially constructed reality, I view scientific research as a socially constructed reality, where scientific knowledge is no less a human creation and possession than any other form of knowledge — a theme to which I will return continually in this chapter. For me to write solely in the third person or passive voice would be to pretend that I am invisible or have never existed. Such a pretense would be as silly as it is false. I will use the first person plural for referring to myself along with my colleagues in the community of qualitative IS researchers, and reserve the first person singular to express my own thoughts, value judgments, and experiences. However, I am writing this chapter for an audience that includes all IS researchers.

Second, I will apply our own qualitative IS research to ourselves as qualitative IS researchers. We are accustomed to being the observers, not the observed. Here, I will turn the tables on ourselves and force us to look at ourselves in the same way that we have investigated others. This will involve framing qualitative IS researchers (ourselves) as the users of a particular form of information technology (qualitative research methods) for managing a particular type of information (scientific theory and evidence). This framing will then position me to ask, “what lessons may I derive from our own past qualitative studies on information systems for insights about ourselves as qualitative IS researchers?”

Third, rather than write this chapter as an empirical account, I will present challenges to scholars who are members of the qualitative IS research community. I will make value judgments, offer negative criticisms, and propose new directions, all in a reasoned manner akin to that of an editorial or polemic.

I will begin by presenting my conceptions of what an information system is and what a systems approach involves, where I will also present the first of my challenges to the community of qualitative IS researchers. Next, I will proceed to take a systems approach in my

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