

Chapter 4

Online Qualitative Interviews: Opportunities and Challenges for Urban and Planning Studies

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ABSTRACT

Computer mediated communication is a part of everyday life for much of the population. People rely on email and instant messaging, post to chat rooms and blogs, and routinely use the Internet for a wide variety of functions. As a result, the options for qualitative study available to urban planners and researchers have expanded dramatically. This chapter examines the feasibility of online qualitative interviews. The chapter begins with an overview of the online options or venues (e.g., chat rooms, bulletin boards, social networking sites, email) currently available to the qualitative researcher. Next, issues of data quality in online interviews are discussed, and various online venues are compared to in person or face-to-face interview modes. Additionally, the authors discuss some of the central ethical and human subject protection issues involved in the online research landscape. The chapter concludes with an assessment of the potential for online qualitative interviews.

INTRODUCTION

Qualitative research allows us to enter the subjective experience of our respondents – to see their world through their eyes. At the heart of this research tradition is the interview. Whether

interviewing is the main or only method used to learn about respondents' worlds, or supplements a broader ethnographic project, we learn about people by talking with them.

Qualitative research encompasses a remarkably rich variety of epistemological traditions, methods, and techniques, and has a place in both

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academic and applied research settings. Many academic researchers are more comfortable with the structure and shared assumptions of the quantitative paradigm. However, qualitative research has its academic proponents, and applied research often relies on qualitative methods, particularly on qualitative interviews.

Qualitative interviews are often described as a “conversation with a purpose.” What is most critical about the interview is the transaction between the researcher and the respondent. Indeed, reactivity – the influence that the data collection method has on the information gathered – is particularly an issue in the design and analysis of qualitative research. Thus the data gathered via interviews reflect not only the information offered by the respondent, but also matters like the influence of the researcher’s characteristics, the setting, question wording and sequence, and duration of the interview. The data also reflect, to some extent, the selection of interview mode, or the method of interviewing. Traditionally, interview mode has referred to matters such as whether the interview is conducted face-to-face, or over the telephone, and whether it is a personal interview with one researcher and one respondent, or a group interview with one researcher or facilitator and several respondents.

Online interviews represent yet another mode, and one that is expanding rapidly. As noted by Markham (2008), the opportunity for Internet-based qualitative research is “beguiling: A researcher’s reach is potentially global, data collection is economical, and transcribing is no more difficult than cutting and pasting” (p. 255). Yet, much needs to be learned about this evolving option for qualitative research.

As a practical matter, online interviewing is not a unitary mode in the sense that telephone interviews constitute a single mode of data collection. Perhaps when the Internet was new, and online options limited and more or less entirely text-based, it made sense to think of “online interviews” as a unitary mode. However, as the

options have increased, and the virtual-physical world interface has become more permeable, a “single mode” view simply is not correct. And increasingly, the difference between online and traditional communication is diminishing; broadband technology has made “today’s media landscape one of increasing convergence” (Gies, 2008, p. 312) (see also Sade-Beck, 2004; Bowker & Tuffin, 2004).

Of perhaps more interest are the implications of these new modes of interviewing. As Markham (2008) notes, “Simply put, our methods are still more suitable for research in physically proximal contexts... our epistemological frameworks have not yet shifted to match this [online] reality” (p. 278). Certainly, what we know about traditional qualitative interviews does not transfer directly to online options. Instead, as Markham (2008) and others have suggested, we need to explore the extent to which online interviews are similar and dissimilar to traditional face-to-face interviews, and to consider carefully the implications for our findings.

Ten years ago, Seymour wrote “while online research is exciting, it is no longer new” (2001, p. 164), and experience and reflection about online interviewing have grown over the past decade. At the same time, the nature of “online” options has continued to expand, and the pace of change has quickened. What we attempt in this chapter, therefore, is a modest summary of what we know about using online technologies to conduct qualitative interviews.

These methods are relevant to urban planning studies, the focus of this text. Recent trends in urban planning include sustainability and inclusion of the full range of stakeholders in the planning process. While not without controversy (Astrom & Granberg, 2007), the move to incorporate citizen perspectives through increased participation via survey and discussion is widespread. The potential for such participation is vastly increased when citizens, planners, and policy makers can rely on electronic or computer mediated communication

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