

# Christine Hine (2004) 'Social Research Methods and the Internet: A Thematic Review'

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Thematic Reviews are collections of articles that have been published in previous issues of *Sociological Research Online*, accompanied by a critical introduction / review by a guest editor. Thematic reviews draw together articles on a particular theme or topic area, and situate these within a broader context. The editors of the journal are happy to discuss suggestions for thematic reviews with potential guest editors. Please contact the editorial office of the journal ([socres@soc.surrey.ac.uk](mailto:socres@soc.surrey.ac.uk))

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## Introduction

1.1 Sociological Research Online did not set out to be a journal about the Internet. It could more accurately be framed as "action research" where the Internet is concerned, since by the practical doing of Internet publishing, and by trying to exploit the possibilities of the technology, the journal has set out to change and challenge existing practice (Bulmer and Stanley, 1996). It is possibly not surprising, however, that it has often attracted sociologists who are interested in the Internet as a topic. Without ever setting out to be an authority on sociology of the Internet and sociology done via the Internet, the journal has over the course of time become a rich resource for finding sociologists who are unafraid of the Internet and who use it in interesting and fruitful ways in their research.

1.2 Along with the regular series of items on Internet based resources for sociologists, papers by Slack (1998) and Dicks and Mason (1998) have explored the ways in which sociology could make more imaginative use of the Internet to structure and publish research. There has also been an impressive selection of papers discussing the role of computers in sociological research. Sociological Research Online has emerged as a journal distinctive for its technological awareness, in ways that go well beyond the medium through which it is distributed. In this thematic review I focus solely on papers which discuss the Internet as a medium for conducting research or as a source of data, drawing out some key methodological issues which emerge. Hopefully these will act as pointers for those who want to find resources to help them in using Internet to research phenomena of contemporary social life.

1.3 The electronic nature of the journal, and specifically the facility to search the entire corpus of published articles by keyword, provides interesting possibilities for tracing developments over time. In preparing for this thematic introduction I was able to locate relevant articles by searching for those which mentioned specific words (the terms that I used were: Internet; web; email; electronic; digital; cyber; and virtual - this last term being somewhat of a miscalculation on my part, since it caught rather too many authors who used "virtually" to mean "almost" and hardly any papers relating to the technologies that interested me). Searching in this way, rather than scanning tables of contents as would have been necessary in a printed journal, led me to some surprises: I had no idea how many people writing articles on topics ostensibly far removed from sociology of the Internet would be finding it relevant to mention the use of web pages as data, or using email to make contact with research informants. Thanks to the electronic nature of Sociological Research Online I was able not just to focus on Internet research methods as an explicit topic for discussion, but also to gain a sense of the extent to which using information and communication technologies is becoming a routine part of getting research done across sociology.

1.4 Mentions of the Internet in passing, as a cultural site, a way of communicating or a source of representations were made by, among others, Bancroft (1999), Buttel (1999), Linden (1999), Nerlich et al (1999), Winter (2000), Boden (2001), Chesters and Smith (2001), Dunne (2001), Lyon (2001), Walliss (2002), Allen (2003), Deem and Johnson (2003), Hunt (2003), Misztal (2003) and Heather (2004). Clearly the Internet is becoming embedded into sociology as a site of social life and conduit of social interaction that does not always need to be specifically marked out for comment. It seems that anxiety over the possibility of finding something that would count as social life online has died down and been replaced, for the authors of Sociological Research Online at least, with a sense of the Internet as simply another context where social life is lived, where research methods are applied, and where contemporary social issues are addressed.

1.5 Authors in Sociological Research Online interweave discussions of the Internet with concerns such as the nature of privacy (Stalder, 2002), the sociology of money (Singh, 2000) and the future shape of a society that increasingly incorporates computer-supported social networks (Wellman, 2000) and is more reliant on information and communication technologies (Gimenez, 2000; Porter, 2000). For some authors the Internet is a context in its own right, ripe for exploring via a variety of research and simulation techniques: for example, Boudourides and Antypas (2002) show how the structure of the World Wide Web can be simulated by a model based on a relatively small set of assumptions about the behaviour of web actors. For many, however, the Internet has been incorporated into the broader remit of a sociology which wants to follow social life wherever and however it is manifested (Davies and Charles, 2002).

1.6 In arriving at a point where the qualities of computer-mediated communication have become an intrinsic part of a contemporary sociology it has been important to think about how these technologies affect our own theories and methods. Some of the explicitly methodological papers that I review here have been influential in assessing advantages and disadvantages, demonstrating possibilities and making practical recommendations. All have taken us a bit further forward in developing a portfolio of research experience to learn from in developing future studies. Whilst we all learn our research techniques by experience, and whilst every research problem and setting is unique, we can always benefit from the accounts of others. The next sections of this review introduces some key themes in methodological thinking about the Internet that have been addressed by papers in Sociological Research Online over the years, looking first at ethnography online and offline, and then at the Internet as a means of finding populations and forming connections. In the final section of this review I focus on some approaches to research which suggest the need for an enthusiasm tempered with caution in embracing the Internet as source of insight into social life for sociologists.

## **Ethnography Online and Offline**

2.1 Over the years it has become accepted practice to think of the Internet as a source of field sites for ethnographic observation, and this perspective has featured prominently among articles published in Sociological Research Online. In two papers on the use of computer-mediated communication in the post-Yugoslav countries Stubbs (1998, 1999) takes an approach which weaves online observation together with a thorough understanding of broader social and political context. In the first paper Stubbs is deliberately non systematic, terming his contribution "less sociological research than an intervention in the field of cultural politics" (Stubbs 1998: 1.5). The second paper more explicitly develops a methodological position, termed netnography, which stresses the importance of observing online spaces for an understanding of diasporic groups. Without conducting long term or systematic ethnographic field work, Stubbs is able to show the purchase offered by critical online observation suffused with an in-depth understanding of the wider socio-political issues manifested in online forums.

2.2 An explicitly ethnographic approach is developed in some depth by ward (1999) in her discussion of a cyber-ethnographic study of feminist communities online. Cyber-ethnography, for ward, is a way of taking seriously online interactions in their own right, exploring them through a reflexively sensitive process that includes active involvement in online settings and interviews with participants. She studied web sites and interactive forums, adapting her methods to the forms of communication she found. In parallel with Stubbs, however, this also involves acknowledging the embeddedness of online interactions in social life more broadly conceived: "cyber-ethnography challenges the dichotomous relationship between the physical and the virtual" (ward, 1999: 2.1).

2.3 Pleace et al (2000) are unusual in that their observations focus on an IRC (Internet Relay Chat) room rather than a newsgroup. Synchronous communication of this kind can be challenging for the researcher to understand and to describe: Pleace et al deal with the challenge by focusing on the level of the "exchange", defined as a series of linked contributions. The paper then reports on the ways in which various forms of social support are enacted in these exchanges. The authors also note a key limitation of such studies, that we cannot know from observing online interactions how far the support offered is effective or meaningful in the lives of participants. To explore this issue they argue that direct contact with participants would be needed. An ethnographic perspective is thus crucial in establishing that meaningful social formations happen online, and in working out the specific dynamics of those formations, although on its own it cannot answer all the sociologically important questions we would want to ask about the significant of online interaction. In particular, we will often want or need to move our methods offline to explore the embedding of online interactions in other aspects of social life.

2.4 Broadly ethnographic approaches can be supplemented by more in-depth explorations of particular facets of online interaction. In a paper on the use of newsgroups by scientists (Hine, 2002), I set out to explore the way in which contributions were crafted to be convincing and credible by their authors. It seemed appropriate therefore to choose a broadly discourse analytic approach, and to situate detailed examination of particular contributions in the context of some simple numerical information on the

frequency of particular kinds of contribution. Such attempts at a discourse analytic perspective are, of course, always grounded in the analyst's broader understanding of the ways in which the discourse observed is meaningful to participants. In this sense a discourse analytic approach is always based on some kind of ethnographic observation, whether explicitly acknowledged or not.

2.5 The ethics of observing and analyzing online interactions have been the subject of some considerable debate, as Pleace et al (2000) discuss. While some hold that all online research should seek the informed consent of its subjects, other consider this unnecessary where the research is confined to analysis of public interactions particularly when topics of discussion are not particularly sensitive. There is a dilemma for an electronic journal such as Sociological Research Online, which could promote "democratic" analysis by providing links giving access to raw data, even directing readers to conduct their own observations of the same groups. As I discuss (Hine, 2002), even when a researcher feels justified in making use of found material in pursuit of an academic argument, this democratic approach often feels uncomfortably intrusive: one might carefully describe an interesting destination without wishing to direct hordes of tourists to the same spot. There are clearly difficult decisions to be made in conducting online research, and these can be especially apparent where the research is also published online.

### **Finding Populations and Forming Connections**

3.1 Ethnographic methods have often been directed towards understanding the online context as a social setting in its own right, even though we might question whether a socially meaningful online/offline boundary always exists. Where the research question is focused on understanding what online interaction is like it makes a lot of sense to start by observing an online place. To stop here would, however, give a very restricted view of social research methods and the Internet. Many sociologists who have no desire at all to contribute to the latest thinking on the sociology of the Internet may find themselves wanting to study a population who just happen to make use of computer-mediated communication, or needing to save time and travel money by interviewing people online. Three papers in particular in Sociological Research Online have contributed to the development of social research methods for interviewing via the Internet: Chen and Hinton (1999); O'Connor and Madge (2001); and Illingworth (2001). Ranging across practical, technical and ethical issues, and concerning themselves with the quality of data and the richness of interaction with research subjects, these papers demonstrate the varied pitfalls that sociologists moving into this territory need to consider, along with the many advantages that can accrue.

3.2 Chen and Hinton (1999) discuss a range of different ways of adapting social research techniques to computer-mediated communication in their review of the accumulated literature in the field. Their own proffered solution is a web-based system for real-time interviewing, and in a rare move for such papers they make the source code of their solution available for other researchers to use. This method uses readily available technology, and overcomes some problems of email interviews in relation to spontaneity and rapid feedback. For Chen and Hinton there are still major concerns in terms both of limited samples and limited data. They consider electronic interviews to be a powerful technique where the researcher can be sure that these factors do not impact on the research question, or where there is no other way for a given population to be reached. As such, they see the online interview as a supplement to the existing repertoire of social research methods, one that many sociologists not interested in the Internet for its own sake might still be encouraged to adopt.

3.3 O'Connor and Madge (2001) also focus on synchronous interviewing via the Internet. Their aim was to explore the reactions of users of a particular web site: users were asked to complete an online survey and to indicate whether they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview. Since the phenomenon of interest was itself online, the researchers were satisfied that interviewing via the Internet would not raise any additional sampling issues. Indeed, it was important that the sample population be relatively confident computer users since they were required to install the conference software, Hotline Connect, used for the interviews. The researchers set up group interviews, aiming to reproduce some of the social dynamics of face-to-face groups. Much of the paper focuses on the techniques they used to ease rapport and create a conducive environment for interviews whilst also covering the key areas for their research purposes. For this population, partly because the researchers were able to develop empathy with interviewees through shared experience, the online conference proved a valuable way to gather rich data.

3.4 Illingworth (2001) also argued that the Internet has to be a considered solution, appropriate only in particular research contexts. This paper explores ethical aspects of using the Internet as a research tool, within the context of an explicitly feminist approach to research. Where research has the explicit goal of valuing and making available women's experience, we need to consider quite carefully how far new media are appropriate for attaining that goal. Such issues take on a particular cast where the research topic is sensitive for interviewees, as in this instance. Conducting research online could give participants a greater sense of control, away both from the face-to-face setting and from institutional contexts where they felt reluctant to speak out. Respondents were recruited via advertisement in online forums, first to completion of

a survey and then to semi-structured email interviews. This choice of medium emphasized respondent control and privacy, although it was found to entail some compromises in quality of data, and led to some anxiety for the researcher about the boundaries of the research encounter and the very willingness of vulnerable people to participate in the research. As Illingworth says, "Behind what may, at first, appear to be a field of rich pickings lies a minefield of complexity and difficulty" (2001: 17.3).

3.5 Thus far I have focused on ethnography and interviews. The Internet also, however, clearly offers great potential for conducting surveys in cost- and time- efficient fashion. At all stages of the survey process there can be advantages over more traditional methods: surveys can be advertised to mailing lists and web sites where relevant populations gather, both quickly and cheaply; filling in and returning surveys can be made more convenient and even more enjoyable; data entry can be automated and the data analysis process smoothed. All this comes, however, with some caveats about what may be lost in generalisability of sample and quality of data in the move to the new medium. De Leeuw and Nicholls (1996) review the impact of computers on survey data quality but only tangentially deal with surveys administered via the Internet. Some of the issues raised in discussion of Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing and Computer Assisted Self Interviewing are, however, provocative for thinking about how a web- or email-based survey might differ in data quality from more traditional forms.

3.6 A more explicit treatment of the Internet's role in survey research is offered by Coomber (1997). This paper makes clear that using the Internet to reach a survey population has both advantages and disadvantages. While inherently biased towards those who have and make use of access, surveying a population through the Internet can provide a way of reaching people who are otherwise hard to locate or are unwilling to participate in surveys. Crucially, Coomber had a thorough knowledge of the population being studied (dealers in illegal drugs) from prior research. This enabled a careful approach to use of the Internet and, while there is little prospect of judging how representative the sample is, gave some grounds for assessing the reasonableness of responses. While the Internet still has limits as a means to reach a representative sample of the population at large, for some specified target groups this constraint is outweighed by the advantages. The Internet may be a valuable complement to other ways of finding research subjects. Wysocki (1998) used a variety of different approaches to locate a sample of women with bleeding disorders. She focused on locations where such women might be likely to gather or to search for information, including a subject-specific web site. The Internet then features as one of a raft of complementary strategies for recruiting a survey sample, extending coverage although making judgements of sample bias correspondingly harder.

## **Analysing Perceptions of ICTs**

4.1 At this stage in the review we have reached a point where enthusiasm about the potential of the Internet for research populations of sociological interest is tempered with caution. As might be expected, the Internet is not a one-size-fits-all research solution. The papers in the previous section suggested that use of the Internet to reach research populations depended on the qualities of that population and of the particular questions that the researcher wished to pursue. The section on ethnographic research approaches made a related point, in suggesting that both the social formations that we find online and the ways in which they are embedded into offline social life can vary. Taking these points one stage further, it seems that at least some research approaches may need to take into account that ideas about the Internet vary, and can shape the way that people expect to use them. Whether and how a given group of people finds it acceptable to participate in social research carried out via the Internet depends, in the first place, on whether they have convenient access to the appropriate technology, but also in much more subtle ways on what Internet use means to them. In this final section of the review I therefore introduce a few tasters of research approaches that begin to tease out how ideas of what these technologies can do are formed.

4.2 The first key location where ideas about new technologies are formed is in their commercial marketing: analysing advertising is therefore one way to begin to address ideas about what they can do (although, of course, analysing the reception of such advertising is a major research question in its own right). McKie (1996) analyses two published advertisements for Microsoft products, to tease out the contradictory claims made for information and communications technologies within contemporary culture. While not taking a large sample, or applying a particularly systematic form of analysis, McKie demonstrates the potential of such approaches to explore the way in which the qualities of these technologies have been naturalised within our cultures.

4.3 Another key site in which the capacities of technologies are formulated is the policy context. Moran-Ellis and Cooper (2000) also conduct an analysis of a selected artefact, a UK government consultative document about the use of the Internet by schoolchildren. They perform a deconstructive analysis to find out how the technology and its users are positioned. This kind of analysis seems to me to be crucial as a complement to the in-depth study of online environments. Analysing the position of technologies in society through the ways in which they are presented in advertising, in government policy, in everyday social

settings and via the other media seems vital for a rich sociology of the Internet insofar as it reminds us that there is no inevitability to the way in which these technologies manifest.

4.4 Methodologically speaking, neither of the studies that I mention here is particularly ambitious. They speak volumes, however, in reminding that each localised study has its areas of selective attention, and that by focusing too far on online settings in their own right we may be forgetting factors which shape the availability and nature of those settings. Schroeder (1997) explicitly poses the question in his paper on virtual reality technologies: "how is the development of multi-user virtual reality technology influencing how users interact within virtual worlds - and vice versa?" He juxtaposes participant observation of virtual reality environments with an analysis of the state of the industry in an attempt to pursue this question, finding a two-way relationship between industry and users. David and Zeitlyn (1996) explore an ethnographic project based on observation, interviews and focus groups which shows how electronic bibliographic searching tools acquire specific meaning within the cultural networks of different academic disciplines. They also suggest how conversation analytic approaches could fruitfully be combined with the ethnographic perspective. While they do not go online with their subjects, David and Zeityln do provide a valuable reminder that perspectives on Human Computer Interactions should not be forgotten when we think about the Internet. Whilst interacting in online space people are also using a material artefact in physical space.

4.5 These tasters of alternative research approaches are a final reminder that what happens online is interwoven with offline social life, and that the two are mutually shaped and shaping. For each social group that might be the focus of sociological attention, the appropriateness of Internet technology as a research medium may need to be evaluated afresh. A situated solution in each case will be the outcome of a process of crafting technologically and socially appropriate solutions. In this regard Internet-based social research is no different from other forms of social research. Just as we craft interviews appropriate for particular settings, so to we must learn to craft appropriate forms of online interview. The accumulated wisdom that the papers published on this topic in Sociological Research Online provide is a valuable resource in making these decisions.

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