

# **Introduction:**

## **Making Smart Choices on Shifting Ground**

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Every generation believes it is singular in its experience of rapid and monumental social and technological changes. Ours is no exception. Early in the 21st century, ‘The Internet’ marks our epochal particularity. The internet<sup>1</sup>—with all its capacities, interfaces, uses, and underlying technologies—both epitomizes and enables a seemingly constant barrage of reality-altering, globe-shifting changes. Far from slowing down, the barrage seems to continuously accelerate. Despite studying internet-related social phenomena since the early 1990s, the two of us regularly see new capacities and uses that shift how people make sense of and live their everyday lives and that raise profound challenges for researchers seeking to make sense of the internet’s places and roles in this new world.

As qualitative researchers of media-saturated phenomena, we notice how the internet brings into sharp relief previously assumed and invisible epistemologies and practices of inquiry. In fact, challenges of conducting internet research have prompted its researchers to confront, head-on, numerous questions that lurk less visibly in traditional research contexts. Consequently, internet researchers have been compelled to reconsider basic principles and practices of qualitative inquiry, with important critiques of a priori methodological certainties. This theme comprises a strong thread throughout the book,

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<sup>1</sup> "Internet" is often spelled with a capital "I." In keeping with current trends in internet studies, we prefer the lower case "i." Capitalizing suggests that "internet" is a proper noun, and implies either that it is a being, like Nancy or Annette, or that it is a specific place, like Madison or Lawrence. Both metaphors lead to granting the internet agency and power that is better granted to those who develop and use it.

discussed in different ways by the authors of this collection.

The internet changes the way we understand and conduct qualitative inquiry. This point is not new to the contributors of this collection, yet its resonance across this collection demonstrates its power. This came as somewhat of a revelation to us as editors. Qualitative scholars that we are, once we had them in hand, we studied the contributions, individually and as a group, searching for common themes and patterns of meaning. What a surprise for us to discover that although the main focus of the book is ostensibly the internet, the most important points contribute to nuanced and new understandings of qualitative inquiry in general.

Why did we put together this collection? Both of us finished our Ph.D.s in Communication departments in the early 1990s with dissertations that were among the first to focus on the internet as a site for and object of qualitative research. We were naïve enough to think that it would be relatively straightforward to transfer research strategies developed for studying face-to-face contexts to life online. Since those early years, we've witnessed and contributed to critical analyses of this assumption. We've welcomed a small flurry of methodological books on internet research and critical reflections on qualitative internet research and ethnography (well represented by Jones, 1999; Johns, Chen, & Hall, 2004; Hine, 2005; Mann & Stewart, 2000). This book contributes to and extends that line of research reflexivity. We aim to make many of the challenges and issues in conducting qualitative internet inquiry explicit, in order that readers can see how others have worked through them and heighten their own sensitivity to those concerns.

Qualitative approaches are open-ended; the foundational principles of this epistemological category encourage practitioners to engage in dialogue that influences

the structure of practice in the field: dialogue about critical decision points, ethical quandaries, and the uniqueness of internet as a mediating factor in research (or the research site itself). Over the years, we found that our research approaches grew more sophisticated as we engaged in informal conversations with others who had studied similar contexts with different perspectives, or the inverse, those who studied different contexts with similar perspectives. However, these discussions do not frequently appear in finished research reports or methods textbooks.

Research reports are carefully edited retrospectives, selected among different story lines and options, depending on one's audience and goals. Within these reports, research designs are generally presented as a series of logical and chronologically ordered steps. Seasoned scholars know there's a complex backstage storyline and have experienced such complexities themselves. But for novice scholars, it is easy to imagine that the researcher's route was successfully mapped out in advance and that interpretive findings simply emerged from the ground or fell conveniently into the path. Qualitative research requires a tolerance for chaos, ambiguity, and inductive thinking, yet its written accomplishments – particularly those published in chapters and articles rather than monographs – rarely display the researchers' inductive pathways or the decisions that led them down those route.

This book focuses on those decision-making processes in qualitative research that so often remain private. For this volume, we gathered some of the most accomplished qualitative internet researchers from varied intellectual traditions and asked them to explain how they have negotiated these challenges in their research practices, to make explicit the theoretical frameworks they have used to guide decisions, and to offer advice

to guide researchers as they confront these questions themselves.

This collection also addresses the broader challenges associated with doing research in this era of media-saturated and ever shifting sociocultural contexts. Not only are the objects of our research shifting, so too are traditional academic disciplines, particularly evident in the interdisciplinary characteristics of internet-related research. The authors in this collection have found themselves grappling with a multiplicity of concerns within and outside their home disciplines. Their success relies on their ability to remain grounded as the research contexts, technologies, and the very nature of their social worlds seem to change, converge, collide, or collapse. We review some of the challenges in this era of research below, noting that even in these amorphous contexts, quality and rigor emerge from our abilities to comprehend and heed the lessons learned by previous generations of researchers while understanding the need for flexible adaptation, a process of reconsideration without reinvention.

### **Socio-cultural contexts in a media-saturated world**

Sociologists such as Bauman (2000), Sennett (1974), Appadurai (1996) and Giddens (1990) are among those who have described major transformations in social order in the wake of increasingly global and capitalistic infrastructures and flows. The internet is directly implicated in at least four major transformations of our epoch: 1) media convergence, 2) mediated identities, 3) redefinitions of social boundaries, and 4) the transcendence of geographical boundaries. Each of these intertwined cultural contexts inevitably affects the identification of our research objects, engagement with research

fields, and design and conduct of qualitative inquiry of contemporary social life.

Media are rapidly converging with one another. The (seemingly) neat worlds of face-to-face embodied conversation, public speaking, landline telephones, radio, television and film have all but collapsed into a tangled web of video clips sent over mobile phones, music played over computers, refrigerators that suggest recipes on built-in computer screens, and sites like YouTube where clips of a broadcast television show sit on the same platform alongside home-made videos. Media are integral to the full range of human social practices. They are appropriated for the everyday conduct of social, occupational and civic life in ways that brings these fields into new forms of convergence across time and space. Qualitative researchers must grapple more than ever with the problem of how to identify one phenomenon when convergence intertwines them all together. Although the authors advocate throughout this book that quality in research design relies on a good fit between question, phenomenon, and methods, these choices are complicated by the cacophony of causal relationships in the field.

The cacophony does not simply exist in the convergence of multiple media and accompanying swarm of information, but the shifting subjects of our inquiry. The contemporary self, which used to seem fairly reliably embedded in a human body, must now be seen as constructed with and in response to multiple media. Kenneth Gergen (1991) popularized the concept of “the saturated self,” arguing that modern identities are pieced together like quilts from the overwhelming expanses of mediated messages in our environments. As Radhika Gajjala and many of the authors note in this volume, our selves are produced through multiple media.

The sociological subject is powerful, shifting, and in terms of qualitative research

design, confusing. Our research models do not fit the multiphrenic subject very well. For example, when conceptualizing, defining, protecting, interviewing, or observing the subject of inquiry, tradition dictates that the research participant have demographically verifiable characteristics. We are taught as a basic rule of thumb in methods courses to identify and categorize, even if only to protect the rights of our participants, but also to use these categories to help us build our interpretive frameworks. In internet research, this rule of thumb about categorizing has tended to result in researchers juxtaposing what happens online with what happens face-to-face, or to search for the real or authentic. Done for various reasons, this simple research practice simply doesn't fit anymore the multiphrenic or saturated subject. Yet as Shani Orgad (this volume) discusses, the question of how to treat data collected from online discussion forums and interviews relative to that collected in physically co-present interviews raises questions that go to the heart of how core concepts such as "authentic" or "trustworthy" are to be understood when experience and identity are saturated by so many communication media.

The internet also highlights the contemporary disruption of social boundaries, as is exemplified by the shifting nature of private and public, concepts that were never as simple as they might have appeared. On the internet's open forums people share their medication regimes, heartaches, and sexual preferences. Genres such as reality television, talk shows, and internet video sharing thrive on the willingness of private citizens to bare the most personal and private elements of their lives to mass audiences. As researchers Malin Sveningsson Elm, Elizabeth Buchanan and Susanna Stern (all in this volume), argue, this inversion of public and private has profound implications for how researchers must approach the ethics of data collection in "public" internet sites, and also for how

the very concept of “privacy” is constructed even in domains we thought we understood. Lori Kendall, John Edward Campbell, and Jenny Sunden further push us to consider what researchers might be losing when we omit our “private” feelings and desires from our scholarly analyses rather than allowing them into the process and public record.

Convergence, mediated selves and shifts in social boundaries are situated within and create contexts in which geographical and temporal boundaries must be reconsidered. When people can have speedy and regular contact across distance using a variety of mediated means for as many purposes as there are conversations, shared or traditionally conceptually geographic and temporal space is less forceful than ever before in bounding our identities, relationships, collaborators, information sources, entertainment, or financial dealings. Instead, the temporal and spatial boundaries influencing social interaction and structures are shifting, ad hoc. For the qualitative researcher, trained in methods of studying a physically grounded site, this raises questions of how to frame the boundaries of a study when any practice is bounded in many ways through space and time, as Christine Hine, Lori Kendall, and danah boyd (all this volume) examine.

The changes in global communication infrastructures in recent times also shift the traditional grounds and audiences for our research. A researcher’s work is liable to be read in contexts it never would have been in years past, which, as the contributors to chapter 5 discuss, creates both methodological and rhetorical challenges in constructing and presenting our work.

### **Choices within the rubric of qualitative research**

Anyone who wants to use qualitative methods to study the internet must comprehend and select from a dizzying array of choices, depending on what region and/or discipline he or

she is approaching the internet from, what advice they receive from friends or mentors, what books they randomly pick off the shelves to assist in developing their study. While there are models and general rubrics to guide one's choices, qualitative internet research is still novel enough to make one's choices difficult.

In common definition and traditional application, qualitative methods have been associated with close analysis and interpretation by the researcher, who has been trained in various specific methods of information collection (e.g., interviewing, participant observation in the field, and notation or collection of such things as written texts, transcripts of conversations, documents, and artifacts), and even more specific methods of data analysis within one's school of thought (e.g., conversation analysis, grounded theory, deconstruction, rhetorical criticism, network analysis, phenomenology, and so forth).

Each of these methods (and others not mentioned here) of data collection, analysis, interpretation and writing exist within cultural, historical, and political frameworks that delimit one's activities as a researcher. Each of these procedures has also been deconstructed in the wake of postmodernism. Qualitative approaches look decidedly different from country to country, even within disciplines. Alternately, qualitative approaches seem easily lumped together. Subtle distinctions in epistemological grounding can make a big difference in one's approach, but it may be difficult to comprehend this when the labels seem similar. This is particularly challenging for newcomers unfamiliar with the historical evolution of a method or longstanding methodological debates. We cannot answer the question "what is qualitative method?" but the complexity of the question must be noted. As Hine aptly notes (2005), the phrase

“qualitative method” itself may be inappropriate because it cannot adequately encapsulate the practices said to be housed under its roof.

Let’s face it: Everything appears to be up for grabs in this era of research, internet or no. Studies and study results emerge in different forms and venues, with different standards of quality, based on an unimaginably broad range of perspectives and methods. We are undoubtedly not the only ones to notice this, but because our object of research, the internet, both contributes to and is entangled in this shifting ground, we feel the impact.

### **The changing role of disciplinarity**

How then do we grapple with the choices? Do we cling to tradition because it has steadier grounding? Or do we continually experiment? People from many disciplines are drawn to study the internet for many reasons. Some want to use the technologies to conduct traditional research within their disciplinary groundings, others to be freed from the shackles of traditional disciplinary practices. Some want to understand something about particular technologies but have little training in the methods for studying them. Others know a lot about the methods of social research but little about the technologically mediated context they’re studying.

Many are drawn to the internet as a research topic because its self-replenishing novelty always holds out the promise for unique intellectual spaces. Research in this area tends to chase new technologies and related, more current or cutting edge research is often valued more highly than what are seen as the out-of-date, old fashioned counterparts. New kinds of interactions emerge so rapidly that the opportunities to contribute something original to an area by incorporating the internet into research are

endlessly open. But novel research terrain brings with it novel difficulties. It is hard to know how well older theoretical and methodological frameworks can be applied to understand contemporary social formations. Can we still draw on theories that were developed in an earlier epoch to frame our inquiry and explain our findings? How do we apply procedural models to a study when these models do not seem to fit anymore? How can we move beyond documenting the new to saying things of lasting value about phenomena that change so rapidly?

In the context of this mixed allure and challenge, few people who study the internet are trained by a person, let alone a program, that gave them specialized guidance on how to do it well. Quality in academia is a discipline-specific assessment and the arbiters tend to be those flagship journals, each of which aligns with editorial divisions of publishing houses that publish our research, host the conferences where we present our work, and provide institutional homes. While most disciplines have awakened to an understanding of the importance of the internet in their fields, most do not have a richly developed core of scholars who agree upon methodological approaches or standards. This absence of disciplinary boundaries keeps internet studies both desirable and frustrating.

Layered atop this, the global nature of the internet exposes many cultural differences in assumptions, approaches, and interpretations, as many of the authors discuss in this volume. This is not a bad thing, in that it forces internet researchers to continually evaluate their own work in light of contrasting perspectives. Internet researchers push the boundaries of disciplinary belonging in ways that exemplify what all academic researchers would do well to problematize.

Because disciplinary journals, editorial boards, and reviewers may have lacked

expertise in internet research (a situation that is changing now, of course), the quality of published qualitative research of the internet varies widely. Although certain scholars can cite hallmark exemplars (as illustrated by the recommended readings authors chose to include in this volume), or name current key journals (such as *new media & society*, *The Information Society*, *The Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, *information community & Society*), these provide interesting illustrations of potential rather than guides for new researchers in the field. This absence of canonical texts indicates a markedly undisciplined field for inquiry and offers much potential for creative research endeavors. Quality must be evaluated at the individual rather than institutional level, a challenge that forces its researchers to strive to understand a broad array of theories and methods from multiple disciplines.

Those who turn to the internet as a new topic of study may find it easy to forget that we are not the first people to live through times of technological, cultural, or disciplinary change. Even those on the cutting edge need to know what remains continuous across these changes and what history has to teach us. If the lack of obvious and singular cultural, methodological, or disciplinary context is taken to mean that there is nothing to be learned from disciplinary traditions or studies of earlier media, the result is liable to be weak work. One of this book's central messages is the importance of historical understanding in making sense of novel research topics. Chasing the new in an academic context is in many ways a lost cause: there is no way to keep ahead of the ever shifting postmodern subject living in media-saturated and interwoven political, economic, and social contexts. One makes lasting contributions and manages the challenges by grounding research. This, of course, is a complicated goal, not achieved solely by reading

the literature in one's own field, but certainly aided by a clear understanding of the tools one is using and a keen reflexivity about the situatedness of the self, one's discipline, and the object and context of research.

### **Reconsidering without Reinventing**

What qualitative internet researchers need is thus an exaggerated form of what all qualitative researchers need – a way to navigate the novelty of the contemporary landscape while drawing on and contributing to the accumulated methodological and topical wisdom of relevant pasts. The particular novelty and multiple contextualities of internet research increase the need to be able to articulate and defend the processes of decision making during research. The authors in this collection are all drawn to studying the novel, but they share a commitment to making sense of the new by understanding the continuity of their research processes' and objects' continuity with the past.

This book comes out of the belief that credible research is driven by clearly defined questions and adaptability in answering them. As Sally Jackson (1986) aptly reminds us, method is not a recipe for success, but a means of argument. The procedures we learn and teach are not a means of ensuring truth, but of anticipating possible counter-arguments. Procedures are designed in order to raise broader issues, as Stern notes, and we need to consider those broader issues in making wise methodological choices. The “steps taken” to solve a “problem” constitute method, but these steps are loaded with assumptions and premises before the process even begins. To understand and apply the appropriate method, one must also examine the guiding assumptions. Then, one must match the most appropriate method to the question, retaining consistency between one's ontological,

epistemological, and methodological premises.

**The format of the book:**

The reader will note that unlike most edited collections, each chapter is titled as a question. We developed these questions in order to provoke explicit consideration of key issues. We narrowed them down to six, which are by no means exhaustive, but which we have found especially salient in conducting, reading, and teaching qualitative internet inquiry:

1. How can qualitative internet researchers define the boundaries of their projects?
2. How can researchers make sense of the issues involved in collecting and interpreting online and offline data
3. How do various notions of privacy influence decisions in qualitative internet research
4. How do issues of gender and sexuality influence the structures and processes of qualitative internet research?
5. How can qualitative researchers produce work that is meaningful across time, location, and culture?
6. What constitutes quality in qualitative internet research?

We sought scholars whose work exemplifies handling these issues well to explain how they think through the question, in general and in practice. At the end of each chapter, after the first author has offered his or her essay addressing the question and provided some key reading references, responses are provided by two additional authors. The resulting range of perspectives offers conceptual, theoretical, and practical guidance while demonstrating that there are many defensible directions in which any research

project could go. Rather than making the decisions that lead to one right answer, research must make strong, context-sensitive choices that lead to insightful answers.

In the first chapter, sociologist Christine Hine, whose research focuses on the sociology of science and technology, including ethnographic studies of scientific culture, looks at how to define the boundaries of the project, both in starting and stopping points. Responses are offered by sociologist Lori Kendall, who utilizes symbolic interactionism and feminist approaches to study information technologies and culture, including online community and identity; and danah boyd, an information studies scholar with a background in computer science, who studies emergent social practices in networked publics.

In the second chapter, media and communication scholar Shani Orgad, whose research uses constructivist and narrative approaches to explore communicative processes in mediated contexts, offers her analysis of how to grapple with the issue of online versus offline in collecting information and making sense of it in qualitative internet analysis. The respondents are audience/media scholar Maria Bakardjieva, who uses phenomenological sociology to examine how users mobilize and appropriate the internet in a variety of social contexts including the home, educational settings, online and local communities; and Radhika Gajjala, a feminist, post-colonialist media scholar who studies the intersections of culture and technology.

In the third chapter, the question of the extent to which privacy or perceived privacy an issue for qualitative internet researchers is taken on by Malin Sveningsson Elm, a media and communication studies scholar who studies social interaction online, particularly the presentation of self in online communities and relationships. Responses

are offered by Elizabeth Buchanan, an information studies and education researcher, who examines ethical practices and regulations associated with information science and internet research from a social constructivist perspective; and Susannah Stern, a mass communication scholar who uses critical methods to study uses and effects of electronic media, with special interest in children and youth.

In the fourth chapter, Lori Kendall returns with a provocative analysis of how issues of gender and sexuality influenced structures and processes of qualitative internet research in her work on masculinity in an online discussion group. Responses are offered by John Edward Campbell, a communication scholar who studies masculinity in gay spaces on the internet; and Jenny Sunden, a researcher of media technology and communication studies who has studied online embodiment and cyber feminist politics.

In the fifth chapter, Annette Markham considers the question of how to produce work that is meaningful across time and location given that internet technologies change radically and are used in very different ways across contexts. Elaine Lally, a cultural studies and anthropology scholar who studies information and communication technologies as forms of material culture and Ramesh Srinivasan, an information scientist conducting research on culture and globalism, respond.

In the final chapter, Nancy argues that the concept of dialectics can help frame the issue of quality in qualitative internet research. She draws on the chapters included here, her own research experience, and what others have written about standards in qualitative research to offer guidelines on what constitutes quality. Annette responds.

The result of our collaboration is not a “how-to” guide. It is, rather, an exploration and explanation of vantage points, a project meant to stimulate thinking.

## **Cross-Cutting Conclusions**

In closing the introduction to this collection, we want to identify six cross-cutting issues raised by the authors in this collection; issues that are fundamental to all qualitative research –not just internet-related research—and which reverberate throughout all of the essays included here.

First, research design is always ongoing. Theory and method inform one another so that the study is continuously reframed throughout the research process. Different questions occur at different stages of a research process and the same questions reappear at different points.

Second, the constitution of data is a series of decisions at critical junctures in the design and conduct of a study. The endless and jumbled network of links that comprise our research sites and subjects create endless sources of information that could be used as data in a project. We must constantly and thoroughly evaluate what will count as data, how we are distinguishing side issues from key sources of information. Reflexivity may enable us to minimize or at least acknowledge the ways in which our culturally-embedded rationalities influence what is eventually labeled ‘data.’

Third, ethical treatment of human subjects is inductive and context-sensitive. As almost all the authors in this collection discuss, ethical issues are neither simple nor universal. The context specific uses of internet highlight many of the complications associated with determining moral or legal parameters for protecting the participants of research projects. Given the complex ways in which people adapt and appropriate technologies for interaction, researchers must reconsider carefully the frameworks that delimit concepts such as trust, authenticity, privacy and consent. Although one might

wish for clear guidelines, navigating these issues in the contexts of specific projects must be inductive rather than rule driven.

Fourth, the role of the self in research is a subject for reflexive inquiry. The often ostensibly disembodied internet calls into question the nature and place of the self in research at a level different from the related postmodern questions of the self as part of the research process. The internet highlights the extent to which researchers co-create the fields of study. Our choices, because they occur in contexts that have no standard rules for research design and practice, seem more poignant and meaningful. What decisions are we making to seek consent, what counts as an authentic self-representation? How are we conceptualizing the embodied persons we study? How are we framing our own embodied sensibilities? Do we approach what we are studying as traces left in public spaces or as embodied activities by people situated in rich offline contexts? We must consider how to interpret other people's selves and how to represent ourselves to the people we study, especially when we may not be meeting them in person. The connection of researcher and researched is a phenomenon heightened by the often-invisible bodies of the researcher and researched in internet contexts. The researchers in this collection make powerful arguments for embracing the challenge of understanding how we are connected in multiple and complex ways to the contexts we create, study, and report.

Fifth, research practices are situated. An awareness of our emotional, bodily, institutional, economic, and social situations inevitably impact all the choices we make in the field, from choices about how we approach the field, collect and interpret data, and represent our work to others. As research contexts and publishing venues become more globally accessible, we become more accountable for taking this into consideration.

Crafting work that speaks to people in other places and future times requires attention the situated nature of our methods and the products of our inquiry.

Finally, research requires the ongoing balance of dialectical tensions. The authors in these chapters point to a number of dialectics: messiness vs. neatness, depth vs. breadth, local vs. global, and one could identify others. These dialectics pull researchers in opposing directions, and a step toward either side entails some sacrifice of insights that the other side would offer. Researchers must be able to identify, articulate, and make reasoned comparisons regarding what might be gained and lost with each research option they might follow.

These six cross-cutting issues relate to any qualitative inquiry and are not internet-specific. Yet the particularities of internet contexts highlight these as important markers for reflection and attention.

In sum, although the internet has made more data available to researchers than ever before and created seemingly infinite alluring research opportunities, the process of conducting qualitative internet research – indeed all qualitative research, and arguably all research – is more complex than ever before. We hope that the insights gathered in the chapters that follow serve as exemplars and sources of advice to help readers manage these challenges with rigor in their own research.

