

Title: Interviewing Online: qualitative research in the network(ed) society

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Interviewing Online: qualitative research in the network(ed) society

Abstract

This paper seeks to extend the conversation about the use of computer-mediated communication in qualitative research by focusing in particular on two issues of importance to qualitative researchers: building rapport and interpreting meaning. After giving an account of how the Internet was utilised in a research project with young adults, the qualities of the resulting qualitative data are discussed. Two computer-based communication media were used to conduct semi-structured interviews: e-mail and online chat. It was found that the e-mail medium was very successful in eliciting rich replies from participants, but it was sometimes difficult to read the emotional tone in which the e-mails were written. Chat room interviews were not successful in eliciting narrative responses due to the constraints of the medium, but the use of paralinguistic devices to approximate speech enhanced the reading of meaning. Computer-mediated communication can be a useful addition to the qualitative researcher's toolbox.

Keywords: computer-mediated communication, interviewing, e-mail, chat rooms.

Introduction

The network society (Castells, 1996) throws up new challenges for the qualitative researcher. The increasing use of the Internet as a social space, where people initiate and maintain social relationships, expands the number of research sites from the “real” to include the “virtual”¹. While computer-mediated communication (CMC) originated in organisational settings, the popularity of the Internet for recreational uses has been astounding (Walther, 1996; Baym, 1998). While the “digital divide” excludes many sectors of the population from participating online, for particular sectors of the community, access to online forms of communication is part of everyday life. A panoply of online “communities” have developed through the use of chat rooms, multi-user domains and bulletin board systems, and e-mail has become a standard form of professional and personal communication. The importance of the Internet for establishing and maintaining relationships has lead some to call for a change from the term “ information technology” to “relationship technology” to describe our new machines and networks (Schwartz, 1996). The phenomenon has also attracted the attention of scholars, and much research has been carried out on online “communities” (e.g. Jones, 1997; Giese, 1998; Markham, 1998; Cherny, 1999; Chayko, 2002). Rather than cyberspace being inhabited by socially inept “nerds”, some research has shown that participating in online communities does not come at the expense of real life (RL) community, but rather in addition to it (Baym, 1998). As Giese (1998:5) puts it “neither the gregariousness nor the inventiveness that make human beings unique have been left behind as they enter the new social environment of cyberspace”.

In this paper, I explore the issues involved in conducting qualitative research online, in particular, the use of the interview method. I draw on my experience of conducting interviews with young people using e-mail and online chat. This paper continues a conversation about the use of computer-mediated communications in qualitative research begun by Mann and Stewart (2000), Bampton and Cowton (2002) and Hessler, Dowling, Beltz, Pellicio, Powell and Vale (2003). I focus in particular on two issues of vital importance to qualitative researchers that online methods make problematic: building rapport and interpreting meaning. If, as Angrosino (1989) suggests, talking to people about their lives results in a *document of interaction*, in which the stories told are fundamentally shaped by the nature of the interaction between the researcher and participant, then the constraints and opportunities involved in the use of online methods needs to be fully understood and accounted for in any report of research. The aim of this paper is to explore and discuss these opportunities and constraints to allow qualitative researchers make informed decisions about the use of such methods².

Firstly I give an overview of the study in which I used online methods, before discussing building rapport in CMC and interpreting meaning in text.

The research context

The results reported in this paper grew out of a study of young adults, aged between 18 and 25, with common mental health problems (depression, anxiety and substance misuse) in Australia. The Australian Bureau of Statistics conducted a national telephone survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing in 1997. The survey instrument

was designed to allow the interviewer to diagnose the presence of a common mental health problem using the International Classification of Diseases, version 10 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1998). The results showed that around 25 per cent of young adults in Australia suffered from a common mental health problem (CMHP). The types of CMHP diverged by gender, with three times as many young women suffering from depression compared to young men, and men with twice the prevalence of substance misuse disorders. The apparent gender difference was the stimulus for the current project, which sought to explore this through the use of qualitative interviews with young men and women who suffered from a CMHP. The survey also revealed that the majority of young adults who suffer from CMHPs do not seek help from any kind of health professional. This makes locating potential research participants difficult, as there is no particular physical space in which one can recruit. However, sufferers do gather in cyberspace. The *DepressioNet* website is an Australian website that offers information and an online chat facility to support those suffering from depression (www.depressionnet.com.au). It has a section promoting research projects on depression, where I placed an advertisement inviting young people to become participants. My advertisement included a hyperlink to a website I developed that offered information about the research project, my *curriculum vitae* and a small photo of my face. This allowed people to read the aims and objectives of the project, and what would be required of them, prior to contacting me. The website also included links to groups who offered support to those suffering from a CMHP.

A concern arising from using the Internet for recruitment is that the resulting sample will be made up of those from a narrow sector of society. In Australia, 33 per cent of

households have access to the Internet. These households are more likely to consist of wealthier city dwellers with a high level of education. However, 75 per cent of young adults have access to the Internet, with the most popular use of the Internet being e-mail and online chat (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2000). In spite of the exclusion of the poorer sectors of the community, and given the difficulties of recruiting young people from a physical location, using the Internet to recruit and conduct research with young people seemed an appropriate research strategy to adopt³.

I gave participants a choice about the kind of interview medium they felt more comfortable with: face-to-face (for those who lived in the same city as I did), telephone, e-mail or through my own chat room (Nicshep's Research Lounge, see Figure 1). In all, I conducted 46 semi-structured interviews: 15 face-to-face, 11 telephone, 13 e-mail and 7 by chat room. In the following, I focus on discussing and comparing the e-mail and chat room interviews.

Interviewing Online

Chat Room Interviews

Figure 1 shows the chat room I set up, hosted by BeSeen (this is no longer available). I paid US\$20 to have a room that did not have any banner ads and was protected by a password. It was a private room, so no one could find it by surfing the web. For those interested in an interview in a chat room, I gave out the website address so they could have a look at it before they agreed. Participants needed to register a "handle" or nickname and a password before they entered the room. This "gateway" gave me

the option of banning people if they became nuisances. The benefit of using this room was that people did not need to download any special software, making online chatting easier for those who were unfamiliar with it. However, those who did volunteer to use the chat room were experienced chatters who already used chatting software like ICQ (web.icq.com). Belatedly, I discovered ICQ offered the potential for private chat, provided a nicely formatted interview transcript and offered more sophisticated formatting options than my own chat room. After my discovery only one person requested an online interview, as a result, 6 interviews were conducted in Nicshep's Research Lounge and one with ICQ.

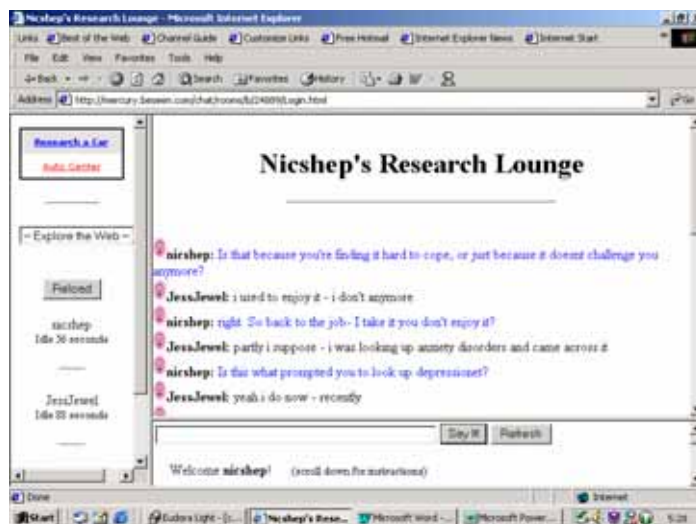


Figure 1. The chat room where I conducted most of my online interviews. It was hosted by LookSmart BeSeen, which no longer offers this service.

Conducting interviews in a chat room is very slow and frustrating. Typing takes longer than speaking, and people can only see your reply once you hit the “send” button. Due to a combination of the time needed for participants to compose an

answer as well as technical factors such as data transmission speeds, most response turns took at least a couple of minutes to complete. Face-to-face or phone interviews took around 30 to 45 minutes, but online interviews took four hours to complete. As a result I broke the interviews up into two, two-hour sessions. Markham (1998) also found her online interviews very slow and like mine, taking up to four hours (p.72). She spent the time between responses surfing the web, updating her research journal and doing her online shopping (p.54).

The “silence” between responses was also difficult to interpret, as there was no easy way to tell if the “silence” is a pause or a gap (Cherny, 1999). The amount of text that one can type into a “send” box is limited, meaning that one “reply” that appears on the screen may only be half of a response. If one replies too soon, the turn has not been completed, leading to a transcript with overlapping turns. Suggestions reported by Herring (1999) and Murray (1988) is the use of a symbol, such as a “%” or “...” at the end of a text box to indicate to your conversation partner that you have not yet completed your turn. I often found that I was interrupting my participants due to this problem.

E-mail interviews

Prior to commencing the formal part of the e-mail interviews, I told the participants that I had around 30 set questions, but would probably think of new questions in response to their replies. This gave them a sense of how many e-mail exchanges were likely to take place. I did not establish any ground rules in regard to follow up e-mails, which would have been useful, as it was difficult to sense why someone was not responding to the last e-mail and to know how best to deal with that situation. Bampton & Cowton (2002) suggest the establishment of ground rules prior to e-mail

interviewing, such as defining a particular time period after which you will send a follow up e-mail, or even setting up a website listing e-mail protocols that is hyperlinked from your own e-mail signature. This ensures you are not perceived as “harassing” a no-longer-interested research participant.

During my e-mail interviews, I would send one or two questions at a time so that the exchanges would have the sense of being a conversation. Once receiving a reply I would ask follow up questions or just move on to my next set question. I felt that this encouraged participants to give full answers. Another reason for limiting the number of questions sent in one e-mail is the view that e-mails should be able to be read in one screen view (Crystal, 2001). A few of my participants would write more than one screen view in reply (often with an apology about “raving on”), but generally I found most replies to be contained in one view. A typical e-mail to a participant would start with a general enquiry about how they were, with perhaps a comment on their last reply. If they had asked me a personal question, I would respond in the first paragraph. The second paragraph would contain the next “official” question. As a result the interaction had more of an intimate feeling than the interviews I conducted in the chat room, face-to-face or by phone. In interviews in real time (synchronous), time is a limited resource, if the interviewer spends time talking about themselves, this takes away the “air time” available to the participant. People checking their personal email accounts are usually in a relaxed and conversational frame of mind. Personal revelations from the researcher would not necessarily be perceived as an infringement on their time. This would be different if participants were responding in a work setting.

Most of the participants I interviewed via e-mail give rich and full answers to my questions, equivalent to, and in some cases *more* in-depth than voice-based interviews. The time taken to complete the thirteen e-mail interviews I conducted ranged from two weeks to 18 months, though the average time taken was two and a half months. The duration of the interviews over a number of months gave more of an insight into the conditions of the participants' lives, than the one-off interviews did.

Rapport and CMC

E-mail interviews have been utilised successfully by a number of authors (Mann and Stewart 2000, Bampton 2002 and Hessler et al 2003). In my own study, I was struck by how willing people seemed to be to share very personal aspects of their lives, with very little “interactional work” on my part to establish rapport. It seemed as though communicating via e-mail lent itself to personal disclosure. Janney (1996) labelled this phenomenon “e-mail intimacy”, and he says, “...e-mail seems to encourage displays of affect that would be unusual between strangers in normal written correspondence, telephone conversation, or face-to-face interaction”. This e-mail intimacy is illustrated in the example below. I received this e-mail from a friend of someone I had interviewed, a 20-year-old young man who was grappling with substance misuse (original spelling maintained):

Hi there

I got this e-mail sent to me by someone who knows you and considering the state I am in and have been in I thought if nothing else its would be worth doing for some sort of reasonme I am 20 am not fucked up all that badly but I'll give you a quick run down dope /bongs everyday from 15 to 19 experimented a bit with speed and e's in the later part lost licence drink driving home to have bongs end of 2002 that was about 4 months ago and I dont think I have had a day without drinking a fair

bit since Smoked dope mainly to get to sleep although I don't know if that was why but to far excess every night as I said I am not totally fucked I work at a bar most weekends to alcohol is a fair part of life at the moment have done some studies since school but dropped out of both um I dont know I don't really know myself that well and the little i do know i dont like that much... I am more worried about the state I have smoked my brain into over the last 4 or so years. (LS43-1, male, 20)

This was an unusual beginning to an interview (the other 12 interviews did not begin this way), but I was quite struck by how willing this young man was to tell his story. This interview only took four exchanges to complete; as his replies were so detailed he answered many of my questions before I even asked. This might be especially significant for researchers working with young men, as they are notoriously difficult to recruit and once recruited, sometimes difficult to encourage to speak freely.

While this opening in the e-mail interviews was unusual, what was common to most of the interviews was the ease of personal disclosure - the e-mail exchanges had the feeling of being letters between old friends. The sense of freedom people experience to express themselves in CMC has been discussed by a number of authors. Danet (1998) describes cyberspace as having a carnivalesque atmosphere, where it is always night. When people are limited to the use of text to communicate they are in effect wearing a mask of their own choosing that allows them to feel less inhibited about expressing themselves. They feel a sense of control over their self-presentation which is not available face-to-face or even over the phone. They are safe from the judgements that others make about bodily performance (tone of voice, eye contact, gestures) and about who they might be: what they look like, what they are wearing, their age and gender. Rushkoff (1994:35) describes cyberspace as somewhere where "one forsakes both body and place and becomes a thing of words alone". This

forsaking of the body fulfills the Platonic desire to free the intellect from the constraints of the body. In cyberspace, the “cybernaut leaves the prison of the body and emerges in a world of digital sensation” (Heim, 1991, p.64). This sense of freedom is accompanied by a feeling of invulnerability - that the screen protects them from harm. In Markham's (1998) ethnography of cyberspace, she describes how important this sense of control was for her research participants. She says:

A crucial feature of online communication media for some is that users can limit the extent to which others can view or touch them, physically and, presumably, psychologically. Shutting off the computer, altering one's description of one self, and not describing in text or graphics accents what could easily be seen on one's face are just three ways that distance can be achieved. (p.124).

This sense of freedom and invulnerability encourage self-disclosure when using CMC. Walther (1996) postulates a number of other factors that encourage intimacy in CMC; the ways in which CMC facilitates a *hyperpersonal* social space:

- ❖ in the absence of social cues, such as dress, gender, ethnicity and physical attractiveness, interactants tended to make positive attributions about the other
- ❖ CMC, particularly in its asynchronous forms (e-mail or bulletin boards), allowed the “sender” to carefully construct their presentation of self, thereby creating an idealized self
- ❖ these idealized self-presentations created a positive feedback loop, where the idealized self attracted social rewards

These factors often made interacting through CMC more rewarding than face-to-face interaction. The phenomenon of cyber-romance and cyber-sex is testament to this fact (Deuel, 1996).

The hyperpersonal nature of CMC can also be explained by findings of Matheson & Zanna (1990). They conducted an experimental study comparing the levels of self and public awareness among people interacting face-to-face (FTF) and through CMC. They found that those interacting through CMC were more self-aware, that is, focused on their personal feelings, attitudes, values and beliefs compared to those FTF. They also had decreased public self-awareness, that is, negative social sanctions were less salient, resulting in uninhibited, uncensored self-expression. In most FTF interaction, people need to keep many things in mind: the reactions of the other, listening to the other, being aware of appropriate behavioural responses, turn-taking conventions, as well as the more general context in which the communication is taking place - for example a noisy café, or at home with children competing for attention. These contextual factors distract the participant from focusing on their own self-awareness and make them more conscious of the way they appear to others. CMC can reduce these competing factors, and for those researchers interested in exploring the personal feelings, attitudes, values and beliefs of their research participants, this feature of CMC can be an advantage.

The sense of freedom and the idea of text being a mask also raises another issue of importance to qualitative researchers: that of validity. If people are free to construct their identities unhindered by the constraints of their body- what do we make of the information they give us and the stories they tell? The research project on which this paper is based was interested in exploring gender and mental health- how can the researcher tell if they are actually conversing with a man or woman, and they are the age they say they are? The oft-cited case of Julie illustrates a case of online “gender deceit”. “Julie”, a participant in a New York based computer conference, had an

online persona of a totally disabled older woman who could only communicate by punching the keyboard with a headstick. After several years of participating as a very popular member of the online community, her real identity was revealed to be that of a middle-aged male psychiatrist (Stone, 1994). This provoked rage amongst some community members, who felt their trust had been violated. Unfortunately, the online researcher can only take at face value (or should that be text value?) what their research participants tell them. I worked on the basis that most people would not be interested in constructing a vastly different persona in order to interact with me online. Participating with a researcher online is very different from participating in an online community, where identity play may be a feature of the interaction (Herring, 1999). Another factor that minimised my concern with the potential for identity play was that I was interested in exploring the interpretation of medical and psychological discourses to make sense of suffering. This is not hindered if people “make things up”, because they would be doing so using the same set of cultural resources, and the themes that emerge from a set of interviews are unlikely to be significantly affected. The potential for deceit on the part of research participants has been a problem for researchers for a long time (Angrosino, 1989). Communicating online does enhance the ability of participants to lie about their embodied identities, but if the researcher is interested in exploring cultural themes or discourses this may not be of great importance.

Interpreting Meaning in CMC

When people are limited to the use of text only to communicate, they develop compensatory strategies to convey the meaning that would normally be conveyed by paralinguistic cues such as pauses, intonation or vocal emphasis. Language use and

the development of new forms of expression, such as emoticons⁴, have been widely discussed in the literature on CMC (e.g. Giese, 1998; Herring, 1999; Herring, 1996; Katsuno & Yano, 2002; Murray, 1988). For the qualitative researcher, the use of these compensatory strategies means that reading meaning and emotion is possible amongst computer savvy conversation partners. As with any language, the meaning of symbols and acronyms may have local meanings that would need to be understood by the researcher. For example, emoticons used by English speakers are very different to those used by Japanese speakers: the equivalent of the :) (a smile) in Japan is the (^_^) – the expression is based on the eyes as opposed to the mouth, and the emoticon is read horizontally instead of vertically (Katsuno & Yano, 2002).

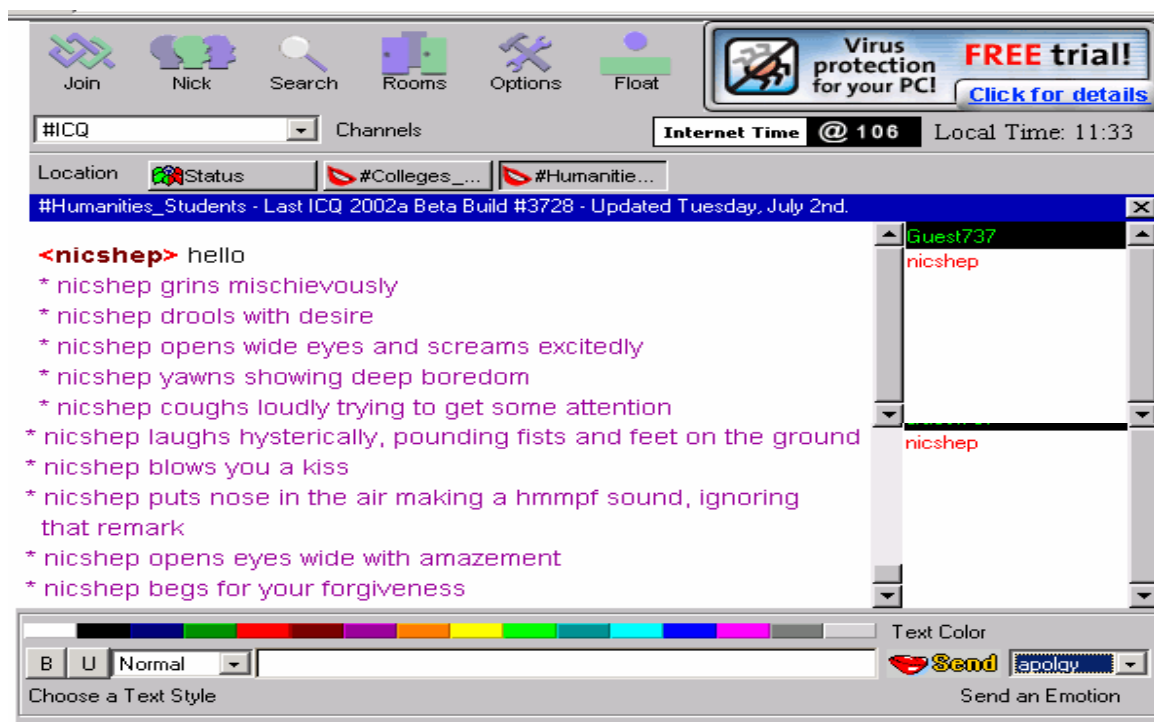


Figure 2. An example of an ICQ Chat room.

An example of the way emotion and meaning can be enhanced in online environments is illustrated by the features of a chat room available on ICQ, a popular chatting

program (Figure 2). Note the ability to use different colours and text styles. The empty box appearing at the bottom of the screen is the “send” box, where you type in your text. In the bottom right hand corner is the “Send an Emotion” box. The text appearing in the chat room itself is the result of choosing from the range of emotions available. For example choosing “apolgy” [sic] results in the text “nicshep begs for your forgiveness”. These short cuts allow you to quickly add expression to your text without wasting time typing. The sophisticated use of these features of a chat room does allow a rich form of communication to take place.

The following example is from a chat room interview with a young woman who suffered from depression. She was a seasoned chat room user: she was a community leader on three message boards and the host of one chat site (related to mental health issues). In the following example we can see her sophisticated use of the chat room medium to convey meaning (her “nick” or online name has been changed).

- 1 <nicshep> Can you give me an example of something that has upset you lately?
- 2 <dust_storm> Well.....
- 3 <nicshep> nicshep gives you complete attention
- 4 <dust_storm> :)
- 5 <dust_storm> Yesterday for example
- 6 <nicshep> *Im having fun with these actions!*
- 7 <dust_storm> I'd like to do more exercise - I called up a gym
- 8 <dust_storm> ROFL - I know you're having fun with those actions - LOL
- 9 <dust_storm> Just calling them, was hard... I was so shy on the phone, and tried to ask them if I could have somebody there show me around, because I'm legally blind.
- 10<dust_storm> But the lady thought I meant I was asking if I could bring somebody with me
- 11<dust_storm> She says: "yes, if you wanted to bring your CARER, that would be fine"

12<dust_storm> And I was too shy to speak up and explain myself again

13<dust_storm> And I'm thinking... CARER?

14<dust_storm> I sooooooooooooo don't need a carer!!!!

For those unfamiliar with chat rooms, the amount of text one can type into a “send” box is limited. However, dust_storm uses the “send” command to emulate the pauses one would have in natural speech, so she starts the story with “Well.....” even though it was technically possible to send much more text than that, as can be seen on line 9. We can also see the use of capitalization and replication of vowels to indicate emphasis and tone respectively. The long time lag (relative to speech) between responses allows the creation of a multi-layered text - while she is telling her story, she is also responding to my actions (on line 4 and 8). As a result of her sophisticated use of the medium, interpreting the meaning of the text she has created is not difficult. In a research context, conducting chat room interviews with less sophisticated chat users may limit the ability to interpret meaning from text alone.

Chat Rooms and Brevity

To successfully converse with others on public chat sites, one needs to be able to type quickly and express oneself concisely. This is because there are many others using the same room posting their own comments, often responding to multiple conversation “threads” (Herring, 1999). The slow typist is effectively unable to engage in conversation because as new messages are “sent” to the chat room, their original message is scrolling up and off the screen. Werry (1996, p. 54) found that the average chat room post is only 6 words long. By typing around six words, the flow of conversation emulates that found in natural speech. This tendency toward brevity in chat rooms means that eliciting longer narrative responses from research participants,

especially those experienced “chatters”, is unlikely. This has important implications for qualitative researchers who wish to encourage lengthy reflections from their participants. In my research, I certainly found that I gained much richer replies from participants I interviewed via e-mail as compared to a chat room.

The following example is a particularly difficult interview I conducted in my own chat room, “Nicshep’s Research Lounge” where the brevity of responses limited my ability to interpret meaning (original spelling errors are reproduced).

nicsherp: do you have a theory about why you suffer from depression?

sas12: no

nicsherp: do you think about what you would like to do in the future?

sas12: never think about the future.. even with this job hunting thing.. just thinking of the next few weeks.. nothing further

nicsherp: ok. Is there anything you enjoy doing at the moment?

sas12: sleeping

nicsherp: Do you sleep much?

sas12: sumtimes not at all.. other times wayyy too much

nicsherp: actually going back to what we were saying before, does the psychiatrist have a theory about why you might be depressed? Just brain chemistry?

sas12: sumfin abotu my personality.. i dunno

nicsherp: What in particular about your personality?

sas12: i dunno it's fucked up or sumfin.. i don't really remember much of what he says

nicsherp: do you like your personality?

sas12: nope...

nicsherp: why not?

sas12: it obviously sux (LS19-1, female, 20)

In this exchange I felt the separation of space most keenly. If this conversation had taken place face-to-face I may have been able to read what was going on for her. There were no cues for me to be able to understand the reasons behind her short replies. I did complete the interview (in two, two-hour sessions), but I wondered why she bothered talking to me at all. I could not tell if she was just in the midst of a bad depressive episode, in which these short replies would be understandable, or if she did not she take the interview seriously. The lack of cues made interpreting this interview difficult.

Reading Emotion in Text

Another problem with interpreting meaning is reading the emotion behind the text. In a voice-based interview, the tone and delivery of speech alerts you to deeper meanings, or an experienced chatter may use formatting and emoticons to convey emotion in a chat room. This tends not to happen in e-mails. The following extract from an e-mail interview illustrates this difficulty:

>What kind of relationship stresses are you having?

mostly husband stuff, a bit of parent stuff. they're 'nice' parents but they don't feel much like parents. They're nice to me, I'm nice to them, but they aren't understanding about what I'm going through. They don't seem to want to know. Mum either has her head in the sand, or gets too emotional about things, and then I feel bad for making her distressed, and change things so she's not getting upset. Dad tries to find solutions and doesn't understand where I'm coming from anyway, and doesn't really like to talk about things, other than a project that he's working on, or how his grandson (my baby) is doing. woops, do I sound angry, how did that happen? (LS26-1, female, 23)

.I read this e-mail as a matter-of-fact listing of her relationship stresses. I was surprised when I read the end of the e-mail where she said, “woops, do I sound angry, how did that happen?”. If she had not written that, I would not have heard the “sound” of anger in her text. This made me wonder how many other emotions I had missed in my online interviews.

Another example of this occurred with an e-mail participant, a young man who was trying to cut back on his drug use. He did not seem to be taking the interview seriously, for example, his email address was name@beer.com. After the initial statement of his drug problem, he seemed to spend the rest of the time telling me it was not a problem. I decided to cut the interview short; and in the final e-mail he asked me to send him a copy of our e-mail exchanges so he could be reminded “that it was all a matter of willpower”. It seemed that the conversation about his drug use was more important than I had interpreted.

A further disadvantage of using computer-mediated interview techniques was that these interviews did not have such a “mind presence” as my face-to-face or even phone interviews. The rich context in which a face-to-face interview occurred meant that I found it easy to recall details and the “sense of the person” I gained from the interaction. At one stage, I was conducting 10 interviews at once via e-mail. Each time I received a new reply, I would have to spend quite a lot of time re-reading our previous correspondence to get a sense of whom I was conversing with and to know the direction I wanted to go with my next question. Considering the complex mental processes involved in analysing qualitative data, when this “sense of the person” is limited, it makes analysis more difficult.

Summary and Conclusions

Many of the e-mail interviews had a formal structure similar to traditional writing forms, such as diaries. The lack of time pressure involved in composing a reply in many cases seemed to allow people to use the interview process as a time for reflection, and they commented on the value this had for them. Other participants answered the e-mailed questions in short one or two line replies, in spite of my urging for fuller answers and sending plenty of probes to open a dialogue. The variation in the way the participants used e-mail can be seen in the examples discussed above, from LS26 and LS43. LS43 used e-mail more like a record of his stream of consciousness. As can be seen by the numerous spelling and grammatical errors, he did not review and edit his replies. In contrast, LS26's e-mails were quite formal, with correct spelling. Using e-mail does not guarantee rich replies, but the sense of anonymity, the lack of time pressure and the ease of communication offered by e-mail seem to encourage rich replies from participants.

The chat interviews were completely different, and it was difficult to achieve the depth and richness that is possible when interviewing face-to-face, by phone or by e-mail. My interview questions were designed to get people talking about themselves, but online I got short responses due to the brevity demanded by the communication medium. Sophisticated chatters are able to add richness to the conversation through the use of acronyms, emoticons, formatted text and by manipulating line lengths to compensate for the "disembodied" nature of the communication. E-mail interviews did not contain these paralinguistic cues. This meant that interpreting emotion in the

chat room interviews was easier than in e-mail interviews, though I did not feel this compensated adequately for the lack of depth. If a research project requires depth, I would not recommend the use of the chat medium.

Traditional qualitative interviewing techniques are suitable for those who like expressing themselves through speech, but may discriminate against those who feel shy about talking to strangers, who prefer to communicate via the written word, or are simply too busy to set aside an hour or so to be interviewed. In wealthy countries such as Australia, many young people use e-mail and online chat as part of their everyday lives. Using computer-mediated communication in research projects with young people seems particularly appropriate. Other sectors of the community, such as those who have ready access to the Internet through organisational settings, may also become more accessible if computer-mediated interview techniques are adopted. The addition of computer-mediated interview techniques to our qualitative research toolbox is not only essential if we want to explore the new social worlds created by the network society, but also to reach out to sectors of the community who would never have volunteered to participate in traditional orally based qualitative research projects.

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NOTES

1. Authors such as Markham, 1998, have dismissed the dichotomization of the real and the virtual and contended that the “virtual” is also real.
- 2 . For a more comprehensive discussion of the benefits and limitations of online methods in qualitative research, see Mann and Stewart, 2000.
3. More traditional recruitment strategies, such as newspaper advertisements, were also adopted in the study.
4. Emoticons are the symbolic representations of emotions, such as :) for happy, :(for sad, :P for rueful grin.