Using the Internet for qualitative research

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An outline of issues associated with using the Internet for qualitative interviews

- **Pros and cons of online interviews** – as with any method of research, online interviews have their advantages (such as low cost and wide geographic coverage) and disadvantages (such as narrow bandwidth of communication)
- **Establishing online rapport and trust** – the lack of visual and aural cues in the text-based online environment raises the question of how the interviewer can build rapport and trust
- **Choosing between synchronous or asynchronous interviews** – synchronicity of communication is the key difference between these two modes. It has a number of important implications for the online interview
- **Recruiting respondents** – this typically takes place online through posting advertisements to online groups but could also occur offline
- **Ethical issues in online interviewing** – there are certain issues that are specific to Internet research and guidelines are available for conducting research online

Hine, C. (Ed) 2005, *Virtual Methods: Issues in Social Research on the Internet*, Oxford: Berg.

Mann, C. & Stewart, F. 2000, *Internet Communication and Qualitative Research: A Handbook for Researching Online*, London: Sage.

Since the emergence of the Internet in the mid-1990s, social scientists have sought to capitalise on this multifaceted research resource. It has served as a site for retrieving information and data, as well as a means of generating new data. While qualitative researchers have been somewhat hesitant to incorporate the Internet into their data collection strategies, this chapter will illustrate that the Internet provides an attractive medium for collecting qualitative data that is well worth considering.

One possibility is for qualitative researchers to use the Internet as a source of "*unsolicited narratives*" (Robinson 2001). In this way, unsolicited data are gathered from one or more online sources which may include web pages and blogs (online journals), newsgroups and bulletin boards, which are used to post and respond to online messages, and chat rooms, where participants interact in real time. Such sources provide ready access to an extensive range of diverse narratives. Their use, however, raises the ethical issue of infringement of online privacy when using words that were not generated for research. The qualitative researcher may also consider Internet-mediated interviews as an appropriate method for addressing a research question within the ethical framework of informed consent. The predominance of interviewing as a method of qualitative data collection in the field of psychology (Willig 2001) suggests that an examination of the use of Internet-mediated communication for this purpose would be of particular interest.

Before going on to describe how qualitative researchers may utilise the Internet, there are several key issues that need to be briefly considered. These are the population of Internet users that the researcher can hope to reach using online methods, the forms of

Internet-mediated communication that may be adopted, online identity and self-presentation and the nature of the social research interview.

The Internet

The origins of the Internet can be traced to 1969 when research led by the Advanced Research Projects Agency enabled connection of computers in four US universities via ARPAnet. Subsequent years saw a number of developments before the emergence of the Internet in the form we would recognise today. Two online sources both entitled "*A brief history of the Internet*" (Howe 2005; Leiner *et al.* 2003) provide comprehensive and readable accounts of this history.

The Internet was originally funded by government and its use restricted to research, education and government. Despite the growth of commercial networks in the early 1990s, it was not until 1995, when government funding was withdrawn, that the way was clear for a commercially based Internet. Coupled with the user friendly interface which had developed by this time (Houston & Fiore 1998), the scene was set for the Internet to enter the lives of millions.

Internet users

Despite the massive global increase in Internet use, one of the main disadvantages for those wishing to adopt Internet-mediated research methods is that its use remains far from universal. The early image of the Internet user was a young, white, educated male. As Internet use increased over the years, the profile of Internet users has become more diverse but certain disparities remain. In Great Britain, males continue to be more likely to use the Internet than females, as do younger people (Office for

National Statistics Omnibus Survey). Differences in home Internet access based on household income are particularly dramatic (Office for National Statistics Family Expenditure and Expenditure & Food Surveys, www.statistics.gov.uk) and there is a continuing disparity in the educational background of Internet users (Dutton *et al.* 2005).

The qualitative researcher who aims to make inferences that go beyond the population of Internet users needs to consider this limitation in their research. In many cases, however, Internet methods are adopted to research a particular group of Internet users, in which case the restricted population of Internet users need not be of concern. One of the additional advantages of the Internet is that it opens up research to a range of potential interviewees that goes beyond the limited reach of the student subject pool that is typically available for psychological research.

Internet-mediated communication

Within the virtual world, there are different forms of information exchange which may be used for different purposes. One of the ways in which these different forms of interaction are classified is through distinguishing between *synchronous* and *asynchronous* communication. This refers to the difference between interacting in real time, where dialogue is more or less instantly communicated between parties, and interacting through media whereby dialogue is sent to the receiver or posted on the Internet and may not be read until later. The former takes place in virtual venues which include commercial chat rooms and MUDs, or employs some other form of messaging or conferencing software. Such real time online communication is also referred to

as *chat* (Mann & Stewart 2000). The latter commonly takes place via email or mailing lists, which are email distribution lists based around particular topics and commonly use the system listserv, or newsgroups, which are topic-based collections of messages that are posted on the Internet and technically somewhat different from mailing lists, and also includes posting information on websites.

The different types of communication are driven by the technology but are also culturally constructed (Hine 2000). Internet users are expected to adhere to what is known as netiquette or "*the informal code of practice regulating the behaviour of Internet users*" (Oxford English Dictionary). One such online convention has developed in certain chat rooms, where the norm is for all the interaction to occur in private chats rather than within the public forum (Waskul & Douglass 1997). These 'relatively safe' environments are also found to encourage behaviours which are not normally experienced in everyday exchange, such as the use of *flaming* which is a display of hostility in an electronic environment (Mann & Stewart 2000). The superficial and playful quality of communication among users of venues such as MUDs or chat rooms may make them unsuitable environments for encouraging serious discussion (Gaiser 1997). A further convention is the use of paralanguage to stand in for emotions that are seen face-to-face, such as acronyms (eg LOL for "laugh out load"), exclamation marks and emoticons (eg :-) for smiling or ;-) for winking).

Given the capacities and cultural conventions associated with both online and offline communication, people are likely to attach different expectations to the use of the various forms of exchange. McKenna *et al.* (2002) examined how people use

different modes of communication over the course of the development of relationships that were initiated online. They identified control as an important element of this particular interaction and suggest that email allows the greatest control over whether and when to respond without the pressure of conversing in real time; chat means giving up some of that control in order to enjoy real time interaction; the telephone provides greater trust, intimacy and physicality at the expense of further loss of control; and face-to-face contact entails loss of all control for the benefit of physical and emotional closeness.

Online identity and self-presentation

One of the major criticisms that is levelled at online research is that we cannot rely on participants to present themselves "truthfully". Although there is nothing to stop people from presenting multiple personalities over the Internet, those who deliberately create online personae have found that it is difficult to maintain more than one such identity in practice (Giese 1998). An investigation of people who regularly participate in virtual environments such as MUDs also found no support for a hypothesis that these people would be more likely to manipulate their image in a web survey (Lozar Manfreda *et al.* 2002). These findings suggest that online identities are carefully created for the purposes of participating in online communities and, as Whitty and Gavin (2001) have argued, online self-presentation is determined by the intent of the individual user and not by the method of communication.

In other words, it is not use of the Internet *per se* that prompts people to adopt personae, but should they wish to do so, the Internet can facilitate such behaviour. While undoubtedly there are occasions when people do seek to deceive others on the

Internet, such behaviour seems less likely to extend to online qualitative interviews. Why would someone go to the trouble of deliberately trying to subvert an online interview for which they have volunteered? Those who have conducted online interviews and their reviewers have been convinced of the authenticity of the interviewees (Holge-Hazelton 2002) and Taylor (1999) points out that much of what we are told in an *offline* interview must also be taken at the interviewee's word. She finds that,

> "*to privilege one over the other on the basis of an authenticity argument (person vs persona) is problematic*" (Taylor 1999: 443).

It seems reasonable to extend the benefit of the doubt to online interviewees and accept that any response is shaped by a range of influences. People who have spent longer in chat rooms have furthermore reported higher levels of openness in their online interactions (Whitty 2002), suggesting that they it might be advantageous to interview them online.

In presenting themselves over the Internet, individuals do not necessarily intend to deceive but may modify their self-presentation according to the circumstances in which they are interacting. The concept of presenting oneself differently according to the situation in which one finds oneself is not a new one. Goffman's (1959) seminal work on "*The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*" describes how individuals moderate their self-presentation according to their situation. In the online context, Giese (1998) argues that the self presented via computer mediated communication can similarly be likened to the presentation of different aspects of the self in diverse real

life social circumstances. One way to distinguish between online and face-to-face self-presentation, however, is that the cues which supplement the other person's words and may be unconsciously "*given off*" in real life (Goffman 1959) are not available online and participants must rely on written information that was intentionally conveyed (Kendall 1998). This more self-conscious online self-presentation has been summarised in the following way:

> "*When chatting on-line, participants are performers performing to an audience of performers – all aware that everyone is performing*" (Waskul & Douglass 1997: 394).

At the same time, the spontaneous and distinctive nature of synchronous communication places it somewhere between written and oral modes (Turkle 1997) and makes it more like a "*written conversation*" (O'Connor & Madge 2001). As with other forms of communication, however, people are likely to have their own particular style and pace when conversing online (Bowker & Tuffin 2004; Markham 2004).

These insights into the use and conventions of Internet-mediated communication have important implications for its use in online qualitative research. As Lea and Spears (1992) have argued, however, the outcome of any computer-mediated communication cannot be divorced from the social situation within which it occurs. It is important therefore to consider the online qualitative interview in the context of social research interviews more generally.

Interviews in social research

Interviews are one of the key tools available to the social researcher. They can be characterised using a range of criteria, including the pre-determination, directiveness and the degree of openness of the questions, the length of the interview, the spontaneity of its arrangement and the setting within which it occurs (Kemp & Ellen 1984). They can also be broadly divided into quantitative and qualitative approaches, each of which has particular aims and resulting consequences for knowledge formation.

The nature of the interview determines the type of data that are gathered, with quantitative researchers aiming for valid, reliable data that are generalisable and qualitative researchers seeking data that are rich and in-depth in order to uncover social meaning. The quantitative survey interview is designed on the basis that each individual should experience the same question and each answer should be recorded in the same way, so that different answers can be attributed to differences between interviewees and not to the process of producing the answer (Fowler & Mangione 1990). By contrast, qualitative interviews can be seen from the perspective of Holstein and Gubrium's (1997) model of "*active interviewing*", whereby meaning "*is actively and communicatively assembled in the interview encounter*" (Holstein & Gubrium 1997: 114). Instead of aiming to control the factors that impact upon the interview interaction, the qualitative interview sees such factors as inextricably implicated in what occurs within the interview.

This perspective suggests that experience of online communication may shape expectations of the online interview. We should, however, bear in mind that this is just one element of the sum of experiences and expectations that participants bring to an online interview (Smith 1998), which in turn should be situated in the context of the "*interview society*" (Atkinson & Silverman 1997) in which we now live.

Online qualitative interviews

In the same way that online communication can be both synchronous and asynchronous, online interviews are classified in this way. Synchronous interviews can take place in any online synchronous modes - using chat rooms, MUDs, messaging or conferencing software – and asynchronous interviews are generally conducted via email. Interviews in both modes may be conducted with a group or one-to-one, with any number of people potentially involved in an online chat and any number included in an email discussion, either through directly copying them in to the correspondence or through distributing summaries of the discussion to participants.

Market research organisations were among the first to realise the potential of the Internet for qualitative research (Chase & Alvarez 2000). Thus, the exploitation of moderated email groups was developed in this sector and a prescriptive method drawn up whereby participants individually supply answers to questions by email and these are summarised by a group moderator and sent back for comment (Adriaenssens & Cadman 1999). Other researchers have pioneered the use of online interviews by simply entering into an email correspondence with participants or arranging online exchanges using various channels of synchronous communication.

While there are a number of distinctions between such different forms of online interviewing, they share certain advantages and disadvantages in common, which the following will describe. In so doing, reference is made either implicitly or explicitly to face-to-face qualitative interviews. Although Turkle (1997) has asserted that the virtual and real world provide different things which should not be required to compete and it may be similarly restrictive to examine online interviews in the context of face-to-face interviews (Gaiser 1997), the aim here is to use comparison with the familiar as a device to explore the pros and cons of a comparatively new and less familiar medium.

Box 1: Our investigation of online synchronous interviews

The boxes in this chapter contain findings from our own investigation into the pros and cons of using the Internet for qualitative research (Evans 2006). For this investigation Alison Evans conducted follow-up interviews with gay men who had already taken part in the Internet and HIV study, a study of high risk sexual behaviour among gay and bisexual men in London. Full details of the Internet and HIV study can be found at www.biomedcentral.com/1471-2458/4/39 (Elford *et al.* 2004). Between July and September 2003, 31 gay men living in London were interviewed one-to-one for the Internet and HIV study by an experienced qualitative researcher (Mark Davis). Mark conducted online synchronous interviews with 17 men and face-to-face (traditional) interviews with 14 men. Alison Evans then conducted follow-up interviews with 6 of the 17 online interviewees and 5 of the 14 face-to-face interviewees. The follow-up interviews were conducted in the same mode as the first interview. They were designed to explore the interviewees' experience of their earlier Internet and HIV interview. All online synchronous interviews (both original, with MD and follow-up, with AE) took place in "private chats" between the interviewer and interviewee which could not be accessed by other people.

What are the pros and cons of online interviews?

While advancements in technology move with breathtaking speed, at the time of writing, only 9% of British Internet users were making use of Internet telephony or video conferencing compared to 86% who use email (Office for National Statistics Omnibus Survey, May 2005, www.statistics.gov.uk). This suggests that text-based Internet communication remains the norm and, this being so, one of the major advantages of online interviews is that there is no need to transcribe them. Given that it may take a less experienced transcriber up to ten hours to transcribe a one-hour tape (Robson 1993), the process is likely to be time-consuming and expensive. Where time and cost are important, a researcher may consider the instant transcript of online interviews to be particularly attractive (Chen & Hinton 1999; Selwyn & Robson 1998).

A further financial benefit derives from the fact that online interviewing negates the need to budget for transport costs. If the interviewer travels to meet the interviewees, these costs need to be covered and if interviewees travel to the meet the interviewer, additional costs of interview facilities and refreshments may also be incurred. Researchers have thus found that online interviews may facilitate or even determine participation where access to interviewees is difficult due to geographic dispersion. In this way, online interviews have been used to bring together participants in China and Australia (Stewart *et al.* 1998) and to conduct research among the Innuit (Christensen 1999).

There are additional benefits to interviewing participants online without coming together in a physical space. They have been used to circumvent the issue of interviewee mobility (Bowker & Tuffin 2002; Campbell *et al*. 2001) and the

commitments of interviewers and interviewees who were pregnant and / or had small children (Madge & O'Connor 2002; O'Connor & Madge 2001).

Another possible motive for adopting online interviews surrounds the issue of whether interviewees feel less inhibited in a more anonymous virtual environment. Computer mediated communication has been found to increase self-disclosure (eg Bargh *et al*. 2002; Joinson 2001) and in survey research, respondents are more likely to disclose sensitive information in self-completion modes rather than when asked directly by an interviewer (eg Tourangeau & Smith 1996). It is suggested that the anonymising effects of the Internet may have a similar effect in qualitative interviews and some people who participated in a health-related focus group found the anonymity of the online medium was preferable (Campbell *et al*. 2001). Although only seven of the 263 postings in an asynchronous online focus group were anonymous, the controversial nature of these postings implies that there are circumstances where participants value the opportunity to remain anonymous among themselves as well as with the researcher (Kenny 2005).

When researching online behaviour and communities, the use of online research methods is intuitively appealing and may serve to increase the credibility of the researcher in the eyes of the interviewees (Taylor 1999). It means that participants are,

> "*integrally engaged with the environment where the topic of the interviews [is] located*" (Bowker & Tuffin 2002: 332).

For this reason, online interviews were used in a study of Internet addiction among college students where some of the interviewees were also resistant to taking time away from the Internet for a face-to-face interview (Chou 2001).

There are undoubtedly disadvantages to using online interview methods. One of the main disadvantages is the narrow *bandwidth* of Internet communication which refers to the limited capacity of the channel to carry information (Kollock & Smith 1996). Whereas face-to-face interactions are enhanced by the many visual and aural cues that accompany the exchange of words, the use of standard textual Internet interaction relies almost entirely on the words themselves. Although little information is provided on how to analyse such cues in a face-to-face interview (Chen & Hinton 1999), it is the effect of the narrow bandwidth of communication on the original creation of the interview dialogue that is a key issue for online qualitative interviewers. While the use of paralinguistic cues, such as acronyms or smilies, add an element of emotion that is difficult to project in pure text, such devices fall far short of communicating what may be conveyed in person. Researchers have found it important to provide the interviewees with detailed information on what is required (Curasi 2001) and clarification of question meaning (Bowker & Tuffin 2004).

Another possible disadvantage is that both interviewer and interviewee should be able and willing to use the communication technology that is adopted for the interview. It is particularly important in synchronous interviews for participants to have strong keyboard skills (Campbell *et al*. 2001) but even without the pressure of typing in real time, interviewees report that writing emails is more demanding than the face-to-face mode (Curasi 2001). The issues surrounding use of text-based communication are

exacerbated for those who are less confident about their literacy and use of this interview mode is clearly limited to those who have attained a certain level of competence in reading and writing. Individuals may furthermore have aptitudes for different forms of communication, with some more articulate using email, others more fluent face-to-face and mode making no difference for yet others (Orgad 2005). Use of language takes on added significance in text-based interviews and becomes particularly pertinent where understanding of terminology may not be shared. Interviews of sexual behaviour provide a good example of this because sexual words are often used in the vernacular as terms of abuse which may be offensive in the context of the interview and many sexual terms – both formal and colloquial - may not be familiar to interviewees (Wellings *et al*. 1994), which could lead to embarrassment and confusion. While qualitative research does not require that interviewees share a common interpretation of words, a lack of shared meaning may be more difficult for both interviewer and interviewee to manage without visual and aural cues.

A further disadvantage of Internet-mediated communication is that it is subject to the features and functioning of the technology. Before selecting particular software, researchers need to establish the limitations and possibilities of what is available and, once they have made their choice, accept that it may be subject to technological glitches. Data that are not saved during synchronous online interviews may be lost, for example, if computers crash or systems malfunction and it is not always possible to tell whether an email has been safely received in the course of an asynchronous interview.

Box 2: Pros and cons of online interviewing

- **Interviewee mobility** - only one Internet and HIV interviewee disclosed mobility issues but preferred to come in for a face-to-face interview. It should not be assumed that those who are less mobile prefer to be interviewed from home.

- **Openness** - online interviewees had the impression that the Internet encouraged greater openness in their Internet and HIV interviews. As one of them said, "*Talking on-line with MD was easy and I felt I could be very open to his questions in a way that I might have found embarrassing over the phone or face- to-face*" (29 year old male). However, face-to-face interviewees also felt able to openly discuss their sexual behaviour and it may be that experienced interviewers are able to make interview volunteers feel at ease whether online or face-to-face.

- **Interview environment** - online synchronous interviews for the original and follow-up research were conducted in gaydar and gay.com chat rooms. These are two of the most popular websites in the UK for men to meet same-sex partners and meant that the exploration of Internet-related sexual behaviour took place in a related online environment.

Online rapport and trust

One of the key elements that is said to facilitate successful interview interaction is the building of rapport and trust between interviewer and interviewee (eg Fontana & Frey 2000; Miller & Glasner 1997). A good rapport is likely to encourage the interviewee to speak more freely. While nonverbal cues play an important role in facilitating rapport in face-to-face encounters, the lack of information in the online environment raises the question as to how the interviewer can manage to effectively build rapport and trust.

In the text-based environment of online interaction where use of language takes on heightened significance, participants are likely to stereotype one another on the basis of available information, such as spelling and vocabulary (Markham 2004). Other features of the written text such as paralanguage also become particularly important (Lea & Spears 1992) and participants learn the value of using such paralinguistic devices which are typically associated with long term use of synchronous online communication and used to aid friendship formation (Utz 2000).

Other factors also come into play which tend to suggest that the online interviewee is unlikely to develop a negative perception of the interviewer. The online environment has been found to encourage projection because of the lack of such information about the other or "*the silence into which one types*" (Turkle 1997: 207) and a number of effects have been attributed to this. Because they lack the markings of social status which Goffman (1959) describes as stigma, online participants are conceived as "*astigmatic*" which may facilitate participation on more equal terms (Smith 1998). An effect has also been described whereby online communication is found to foster the presumption that the other conforms to the social norm. Disabled people have reported that the Internet enables them to interact free from the discrimination that they face when others were aware of their disability (Bowker & Tuffin 2002). White people also tend to assume that they are communicating with other white people when using the Internet (Kendall 1998). Similarly, online participants have been found to use representations of their offline contacts to build up a picture of the people that they meet online (Jacobson 1999). The structure of the Internet, which makes it easy to find others who share one's interests (McKenna *et al.* 2002), may contribute to this effect.

Internet communication has also been found to engender a highly positive perception of one's online partner and has been associated with idealisation of the other (Bargh *et al*. 2002; Walther 1996). Although it may take time for online perception to reach to this point (Walther 1996), an experiment where participants met a member of the opposite sex online and face-to-face believing it to be a different person each time, found that they liked them much more when they interacted online and felt they knew them better (McKenna *et al*. 2002).

Another aspect of Internet communication which may impact upon rapport, is that interviewer and interviewee can choose the location from which they participate. This may help both parties to feel more comfortable and secure (Madge & O'Connor 2002). A familiar environment such as the home or workplace may encourage interviewees to feel more relaxed but there may be circumstances where they prefer not to receive the interviewer in these places, or where the interviewer feels uneasy about this (O'Connor & Madge 2001). The use of online interviews means that the interviewer and interviewee can both benefit from the reassurance of the familiar.

It can be argued that the research relationship is built on a break down of the power hierarchy between interviewer and interviewee, requiring disclosure of personal information by the interviewer (Oakley 1981). In the online interview, there may be additional grounds for such personal disclosure because of the complete lack of information about the other. Kivits (2005) considered mutual exchange to be essential to the development of successful research relationships with her email interviewees and Madge and O'Connor (2002) posted personal information on a

website and established individual written relationships with each of the participants prior to their online synchronous focus groups. Madge and O'Connor also partially attributed their success to their "*insider*" status as new mothers like their interviewees and users of the website under study (www.babyworld.co.uk). Other researchers have also considered it important to meet interviewees offline where possible before beginning the online interview process (Bowker & Tuffin 2003).

Although interviewees have suggested that the interviewer's manner is more important than their sociodemographic profile (Spencer *et al*. 1988), the importance of interviewer characteristics in face-to-face interviews has been highlighted. This is particularly pertinent for interviews about sensitive topics. It is suggested, for example, that the attractiveness of the interviewer may impact response in surveys of sexual behaviour (Catania 1997). While most women preferred to be interviewed by a female about their sexual behaviour and men were evenly divided over choice of interviewer gender, same-sex interviewers were associated with more candid responses (Catania *et al.* 1996). Another effect of interviewer characteristics is for interviewees to feel less comfortable with an interviewer who is similar to themselves, in case moving in the same circles leads to breaches in confidentiality. This was found to be the case when a black interviewer conducted interviews among black interviewees of the same age and gender (Catania *et al*. 1992 cited in Catania 1997). The relative anonymity of the online interview may therefore increase feelings of trust and openness under certain circumstances.

The development of rapport and trust in the online interview is subject to a range of factors that the medium engenders. The individuals involved bring further influences

to bear with the result that online research relationships are no more predictable than those developed face-to-face and have been found to vary considerably in both rapport and final outcome (Kivits 2005).

Box 3: Online rapport and trust

- **Interviewer perception** - in the follow-up interviews, one online interviewee used no paralanguage at all which left AE with the impression of limited rapport whereas another online interviewee used paralanguage extensively and appeared very familiar. The interviewer needs to feel comfortable with the online medium and understand that interviewees express themselves in different ways in the absence of visual cues.

- **Interviewee perception** - the format and limited duration of the synchronous online interview may not be conducive to forming a detailed perception of the interviewer. As one online interviewee said, "*i definitely could say very little about MD. or yourself in terms of your own personalities or anything really!*" (34 year old male).

- **Building rapport** - rapport with the follow-up face-to-face interviewees began before the interview started – meeting them in the lobby, offering them tea or coffee and so on. By comparison, there was limited time and opportunity to engage online interviewees in such niceties before launching into the interview.

- **Matching interviewer and interviewee** - both online and offline Internet and HIV interviewees tended to favour the idea that interviews on sexual behaviour would be better conducted by a gay man because of the expectation of a common understanding of gay culture. A disadvantage may arise in smaller communities outside London around anonymity and confidentiality.

Features of synchronous and asynchronous interviews

In addition to the overall issues associated with online interviewing, as outlined above, there are further considerations in choosing between synchronous and

asynchronous interviews. As the classification suggests, the synchronicity of communication is the key difference between these two modes and this has a number of implications.

Co-ordination of interviewer and interviewee schedules is one such issue. Unless the interviewer enters the virtual space with the intention of interviewing whoever is available and willing at that time, participants in synchronous online interviews must agree a time and virtual place to meet, in order to conduct the interview. They might, for example, arrange to meet in a particular chat room at a chosen time and exchange screen names in order to recognise one another. Logging on to a computer and entering a chat room is a lot easier than arranging to meet face-to-face and means that busy interviewees are better able to fit the interview into their schedule. The greatest flexibility is offered by an asynchronous interview, however, where there is no need for the interviewer and interviewee to be simultaneously available.

This lack of synchronisation means that the interviewee can take time to compose a considered response upon which the interviewer can also reflect before responding (Bampton & Cowton 2002). With both parties able to reply at their own convenience, the use of email offers the opportunity for participants to use their time efficiently although interviewers may expect to be placed in the uncomfortable position of waiting for a response. Face-to-face interviews are thus said to offer "*more controlled outcomes*" because they may be completed in an hour or two whereas the asynchronous electronic interview can take weeks or months to complete (Bowker & Tuffin 2003). This can become demanding for all concerned and asynchronous interviewers are faced with the problem of striking the right balance between

maintaining the momentum of the email exchange and allowing interviewees time to reply without leading to interview "*fatigue*" (Bampton & Cowton 2002). If the exchanges drag on and participation becomes burdensome in this way, it also increases the interviewees' likelihood of dropping out of the study (Dillman 1978). When the right balance is struck, however, the interviewer may benefit from the insights gained over this temporally extended interview process (Seymour 2001).

Synchronous interviews have the advantage of taking place in real time under the expectation of a comparatively rapid exchange of dialogue. They tend to be completed over a much shorter period of time that often consists of a single sitting for an hour or so. While asynchronous interviews allow for reflection at the risk of dragging on, synchronous interviews are said to encourage a more spontaneous response at the risk of interviewees feeling "*rushed to respond*" (Chen & Hinton 1999). This is particularly likely among those who are unfamiliar with the medium, who may feel uncomfortable about the silence between exchanges.

The immediacy of the synchronous interview helps to motivate interviewees through palpable demonstration of the interviewer's attention and commitment whereas the lack of interviewer presence in the asynchronous interview is likely to have a differential impact upon the individual interviewees according to their levels of motivation (Curasi 2001). In a comparison of the data from face-to-face interviews, Curasi (2001) found that the computer-mediated asynchronous interviews generated both the strongest and the weakest transcripts, with some interviewees providing short, precise responses and others discussing the issues in detail. Differences in the

level of communication are similarly likely between those who participate in asynchronous focus groups using discussion lists (Moloney *et al.* 2003).

As suggested above, the data captured by synchronous and asynchronous interviews are very different. Use of asynchronous communication lends itself to lengthier, more discursive texts that are said to be thorough and considered (Adriaenssens & Cadman 1999). Synchronous interviews, on the other hand, are thought to be more similar to face-to-face in that they produce greater spontaneity of interaction but they also produce much shorter transcripts than the face-to-face mode (Davis *et al.* 2004). In this way, synchronous focus groups generate fewer words per comment and less elaboration on reasons for agreement than their face-to-face equivalents (Schneider *et al*. 2002). Synchronous online interviews are said require much longer to gather the same amount of material than a face-to-face interview (Biggs 2000) but there is also a clear difference in the quality of the data collected.

Online synchronous interviewers have found that some of their comments appear banal and their questions too direct (Madge & O'Connor 2005) and interviewees have commented that chat limits discussion because it takes too long to go into detail (Clark 2002). In this way, chat may result in an interview that,

> "*is less like a conversation and more like a series of questions 'fired off' by the interviewer*" (Chen & Hinton 1999: section 12.9).

While the immediacy of chat would appear to lend itself to probing, the nature of the communication makes it difficult to use the sort of probing that provides valuable data

in the face-to-face interview (Chase & Alvarez 2000). Despite the concise and potentially ambiguous dialogue which synchronous online interviews are found to generate, attempts to clarify meaning through probing have been found to disrupt the flow of the interview (Davis *et al.* 2004). On the other hand, the instant transcript and time needed by the interviewee to type out a response allows the interviewer to re-read earlier responses and consider follow up questions as they wait for a reply (Markham 2004). Although asynchronous interviews are conducted without any possibility of immediate probing, follow up questions can be used to pursue areas of interest (Curasi 2001). This provides interviewees with the opportunity to expand on their thoughts although the interactivity of a face-to-face interview may be more conducive to broadening the research agenda (Orgad 2005).

Whether using synchronous or asynchronous interviews, the interviewer is deprived of information about the interviewee's circumstances as they participate in the study. The pauses that inevitably occur in online synchronous communication carry added significance because of this lack of information (Madge & O'Connor 2002). Although some chat software indicates when the other person is typing, this information is not always provided and gaps in communication could occur because the other person is typing, thinking, attending to something else or disconnected. The interviewer may not be aware that an interviewee has become disconnected during the interview, for example, and may find themselves waiting for a response until the interviewee is re-connected and able to explain (Clark 2002).

The interviewer needs to be aware that these pauses make synchronous online communication suited to multi-tasking (Waskul & Douglass 1997) and interviewees

might be composing emails or chatting to other people at the same time as the interview or dealing with whatever else is going on around them. In this way, interviewers cannot know whether they have their interviewees' full attention and must be patient in waiting for a response. Although they can turn multi-tasking to their own advantage and focus group moderators, for example, may use the time to consult a third party on the line of questioning (Chase & Alvarez 2000), interviewers must also pose their questions reasonably rapidly in order to reassure the interviewee of *their* full attention (Mann & Stewart 2000). Whereas silence is often recommended as a useful prompt in face-to-face interviews, it is more likely to disconcert interviewees in an online synchronous interview.

There is found to be less variation in the level of participation among members of online synchronous focus groups compared to face-to-face groups and, combined with the lower level of input, this suggests that such groups may be suited to the discussion of simple ideas where the diversity of opinion is sought (Schneider *et al*. 2002). Competent typing is a particularly important element of synchronous group interaction which may empower some individuals to contribute more than others (Mann & Stewart 2000), although such problems can be reduced by adopting a round-robin approach (Campbell *et al*. 2001). Asynchronous online group discussions are particularly well suited to giving all participants an equal opportunity to express their thoughts. They are found to encourage a range of topic-specific opinions that is not biased towards the opinions of dominant group members (Adriaennssens & Cadman 1999) but which may not have the advantage of the group dynamic that is generated face-to-face (Chase & Alvarez 2000).

The limited amount of published work on the use of synchronous online techniques (Madge & O'Connor 2002) may in part be due to a well-founded scepticism about whether the mode is suitable for producing the type of rich data that qualitative researchers seek to generate. It is also likely to reflect the fact that chat has tended to be confined to the young and is used by only 21% of British adult Internet users, compared to 86% who use email (Office for National Statistics Omnibus Survey, May 2005, www.statistics.gov.uk). This lack of familiarity with chat among interviewers and interviewees is likely to have contributed to its restricted take up as an interview medium. Those considering using chat, however, may be encouraged by the generally positive feedback given by older adults who were familiar with the medium on their experience of participating in online synchronous interviews (Clark 2002).

A related issue to consider in selecting an appropriate interview mode is that people have preferences for using different forms of communication which may extend to the interview situation. Given a choice between participating in a synchronous or asynchronous online discussion, 27% readers of a computing magazine had no preference, 59% said that they would prefer an email discussion over one week and 14% said that they would prefer an online chat for one hour (Eke & Comley 1999). The authors suggested that the flexibility and familiarity of email discussion as well as the negative hype around the use of chat were likely to have influenced these choices.

Box 4: Features on synchronous online interviews

- **Interview arrangements -** most of the online interviews took place in a gay.com chat room. Appointments were arranged by email and a hyperlink to the chat room was sent to interviewees. Having met in a public chat room, the interviewer and interviewee clicked into a private chat that was accessible to only the two of them.

- **Words and expression** - although online follow-up interviews took longer to complete, they generated an average of 2,200 words compared to an average of 10,600 words for face-to-face interviews. There was also more variation in both the length and number of words generated in the face-to-face interviews, whereas the online medium had a homogenising effect on these factors.

- **Constraints on interviewee expression** - as one online interviewee said, "*chat tries to make u rush things*" (34 year old male) and online synchronous interviews may be less well suited to the emotional and intellectual demands of the in-depth interview, given the extra burden of translating thoughts into typing in real time. As another online interviewee put it, "*trying to explain why I'd done something during sex with a guy wasn't something I'd thought about let alone tried to type out!*" (29 year old male).

- **Constraints on interviewer expression** - as one online interviewee said, "*I did think the questions were just cut and pasted from somewhere else because they were chunks of text that sounded a bit like a survey where they stop you in the street ... it was a kind of hybrid of formal questions ... and informal ones*" (29 year old male).

- **Managing the medium** - online interviewees were conscious of the time needed to interact using chat and experienced users had adopted strategies for dealing with this. One of the online interviewees (44 year old male) felt online chat required "*fast fingers*" and others considered multi-tasking was an integral aspect of using chat and did so during the interview.

- **Interviewee expectation** - face-to-face interviewees tended to enjoy the discursive style of their Internet and HIV interview and the opportunity to think and talk things through. They did not seem in any doubt that the interview was aiming to achieve an in-depth discussion of their sexual behaviour. Online respondents also reported positive experiences but were less clear about what the interview required of them.

- **Interruptions** - whereas breaks occurred in the online follow-up interviews when respondents took phone calls or answered the door, one of the face-to-face interviewees turned off his mobile phone immediately when it rang during the interview and did not take the call.

Interviewee recruitment

Although interviewees may be recruited offline, this typically takes place online. Permission from gatekeepers such as website administrators or group moderators should be sought to recruit potential interviewees by placing advertisements on websites (such as pop-ups and banners) or posting them to online groups or by entering chat rooms that they are likely to frequent. It is possible to adopt an active or passive approach with regard to contacting those present. Individuals might be approached directly and asked whether they would be willing to participate or researchers might adopt a screen name that clarifies their identity with the aim of engaging interest in the study.

Provided email addresses are available, potential interviewees can be approached in this way. The use of individually addressed emails is likely to increase response over bulk email (Alves & Szucs 2001) and emails should be seen to originate from a credible organisation such as a university (eg name@university.ac.uk) (Cho & La Rose 1999). There is, however, a tendency for Internet users to dismiss unsolicited emails as spam (Witmer *et al.* 1998) and caution is advised because such approaches have been found to annoy some people (Mehta & Sividas 1995).

Online research using unsolicited narratives

The Internet presents qualitative researchers with an inviting opportunity to seek "*unsolicited narratives*" (Robinson 2001). Data may be gathered from various online sources, including web pages, blogs, newsgroups, bulletin boards and chat rooms, as Mann and Stewart (2000) discuss in detail. These sources provide access to a wide range of narratives which can be retrieved with a convenience that has more in

common with deskwork than fieldwork (Rutter & Smith 2005???) and may furthermore be difficult or impossible to reach through other means.

One of the key features of the Internet is the ease with which users can find others who share their interests (McKenna *et al*. 2002). It has thus become home to innumerable online special interest and support groups which qualitative researchers may consider approaching as a means of addressing their research interests. The use of participant observation or the intensive qualitative study of groups in the real world (Ellen 1984) is thereby applied to the online setting, with the researcher's involvement in the group varying on a continuum from fully involved participant to detached observer.

Psychologists have typically taken a more detached approach to the observation of online groups. For example, data have been gathered from the discussion lists on a pro-anorexia website in order to investigate how participants use such sites and how this relates to disordered eating (Mulveen & Hepworth 2006) and from a listserv dedicated to people who stutter in order to examine the role of the Internet in their lives (Stoudt & Ouellette 2004). Another study analysed chat room interactions in the period following the death of Princess Diana to explore response to shared disasters and coping strategies (Stone & Pennebaker 2002).

Ethical issues in online qualitative research

The Association of Internet Researchers (www.aoir.org) has drawn up a set of guidelines on "*Ethical decision-making and Internet research*" (Ess *et al.* 2002). They advocate that researchers seek initial ethical guidance from their academic

discipline but recognise that there are certain issues that are specific to Internet research. They provide a set of questions which aim to guide the decisions of those responsible for addressing such issues and include a list of references and resources which discuss ethical dilemmas.

This chapter has focused on the use of online interviews to which the principle of informed consent is generally applied, involving provision of information on the study, the implications of participation and clarification of the right to withdraw at any time. Information sheets and consent forms are easily sent to interviewees by email but if ticking a box to indicate consent is not deemed to be sufficient, hard copies can be sent for signature by other means.

One of the key elements of informed consent is that participation in research is entirely voluntary and interviewees should feel free to withdraw at any time. While they may feel under pressure to complete a face-to-face interview, the online environment may provide interviewees with a genuine choice about whether to continue with the process (Kraut *et al.* 2004). On the other hand, the potential withdrawal of interviewees raises another issue that is central to any research involving humans - the ethical obligation to do no harm. The lack of visual and aural cues is important in this respect because the interviewer may be unable to pick up on the distress an interviewee may feel when discussing sensitive topics and the interviewer's responsibility to provide emotional support to the interviewee may thereby be compromised (Kraut *et al.* 2004). Sources of information, support groups or helplines are easily accessed over the Internet (Binik *et al.* 1999) but are of little use unless those in need are made aware of them. Those seeking unsolicited

narratives in such support groups or any other online group must carefully consider the potential harm that this may cause.

The lack of visual and aural cues also raises the issue about the identity of the interviewee. In general, the interviewee should be given the benefit of the doubt with respect to the authenticity of their self-presentation in an interview to which they have consented, but an ethical dilemma may arise over the possibility of recruiting minors into studies where participants are exposed to adult material. Walther (2002) considers this to be an extreme example which researchers would not enter into without due care and points out the fallibility of trying to establish the age of youth on the basis of appearance. In research involving minors where parental consent is required, researchers may request information that only adults are likely to possess such as a credit card number and use offline channels to ensure that proper consent is obtained (Kraut *et al.* 2004).

The respect for online privacy is an important area of ethical concern, with the thorny issue of defining public and private space a prime concern for those who do not explicitly solicit the data that they use (Bowker & Tuffin 2004). Researchers of online groups may weigh up perceived privacy on the basis of whether members are required to register for the group, the estimated size of its membership and its particular code of practice (Eysenbach & Till 2001). Although the use of unsolicited emails for recruitment purposes may constitute an invasion of privacy, the amount of spam with which such emails compete and the ease with which they may be deleted is more likely to raise concern over their effectiveness as a recruitment strategy rather

than the harm that they may induce. The exchange of emails and chat of the type used in the interviews described here clearly represent private communication.

Researchers who gather material in public online domains need to be aware that it could be traced back to its original source if entered into a search engine (Eysenbach & Till 2001). Although communication which takes place in private emails or chat is not subject to this ethical dilemma, all online researchers need to understand that, "*guaranteeing complete data security in a networked environment is not possible*" (Smith & Leigh 1997) and should consult technical experts on the risks involved and adopt systems and protocols with a view to risk reduction. Interviewees should be informed that anonymity cannot be guaranteed so that they may take whatever steps they deem necessary to protect themselves (Mann & Stewart 2000).

Box 5: Ethical issues in online qualitative interviews

- **Consent** - before participating in an online interview for the Internet and HIV study, interviewees were emailed a full information and consent sheet. They ticked a box on the consent form to indicate agreement and returned it by email. At the beginning of the interview, they were briefed on its purpose and voluntary nature and at the end, they were debriefed and permission again sought to use interview data.

- **Interviewee authenticity** - the six men who participated in the online follow-up interviews projected different personalities and provided credible insights into their interview experience in the same way as the five face-to-face interviewees.

Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted some of the issues associated with online interviewing, as well as the advantages and disadvantages of the online mode and the use of

synchronous and asynchronous methods. It is suggested that electronic interviews may be used in conjunction with or as a cost-effective supplement to face-to-face interviews (Bampton & Cowton 2002; Chen & Hinton 1999). They may, for example, provide a cheap method for scoping out issues for future research or a tool for the rapid generation of data as part of a grounded theory approach, whereby data are collected from a variety of sources until emerging categories are saturated (Strickland *et al.* 2003).

Use of the Internet in qualitative interviews is in its infancy and it will be interesting to see how things develop as the technology improves and video-enhanced interviews with sound and vision become more feasible. One of the key requirements for moving forward in this respect is that interviewees should have access to the technology to facilitate such interviews. While general use of Internet video conferencing has remained limited, the year on year increase in broadband connections (Office for National Statistics Internet Service Providers Survey, December 2005, www.statistics.gov.uk) which support such technology suggests that the possibility of conducting such interviews among the general population of Internet users is not far away. Whether or not this will be realised is impossible to tell and text-based online interviews may continue to have a place in the researcher's tool kit, in as much as they generate data that are otherwise difficult or impossible to capture (Chen & Hinton 1999).

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