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Abstract

In *Online Interviewing*, Nalita James and Hugh Busher offer a thoughtful discussion of epistemological, methodological, and ethical considerations related to qualitative research in the online environment. They describe several forms of online interviews, as well as benefits and challenges associated with this form of research. The authors include practical tips for online researchers and examples from studies that employed online research methods.

Keywords

Online, Interviewing, Epistemology, Ethics, Qualitative Research

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Online Interviewing: It's Not as Simple as Point and Click

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In Online Interviewing, Nalita James and Hugh Busher offer a thoughtful discussion of epistemological, methodological, and ethical considerations related to qualitative research in the online environment. They describe several forms of online interviews, as well as benefits and challenges associated with this form of research. The authors include practical tips for online researchers and examples from studies that employed online research methods. Key Words: Online, Interviewing, Epistemology, Ethics, and Qualitative Research

The bright yellow background and clean, blue type on the cover of *Online Interviewing* by Nalita James and Hugh Busher (2009) convey the simplicity and clarity of sunshine and clear skies. These images might suggest that online interviewing is easy, perhaps even refreshing. But glance below the authors' names and we see cover designer Francis Kenney's illustration of interwoven strands that look like the serpentine snarl of computer cables and phone lines under my desk. This reminds us that it's vital to be mindful of the complex issues involved in conducting research online. These are both aspects of the message of James and Busher, who between the covers of their new book present a thoughtful discussion of both the promise and problems associated with conducting qualitative research in the online environment. As they state in their opening chapter:

The online interview presents both methodological and ethical potential and versatility in social science research. It also presents methodological and ethical challenges that need to be addressed when using the Internet to conduct research. (p. 6)

James and Busher describe several forms that online interviewing could take. These include one-on-one interviews that might be synchronous in a chat room or asynchronous via email, as well as group interviews or focus groups that could take place by means of a discussion board. The authors also refer to other types of qualitative research that are relevant to the online setting, such as virtual ethnography that incorporates participant observation (with the permission of the online community members) or analysis of cultural artifacts such as website home pages, which are part of the public domain.

Referring to asynchronous online interviews, James and Busher point to a few of the benefits they see:

Asynchronous communication allows people to respond to communications when they have time available.... Asynchronous

interviews offer researchers an opportunity to gain access to individuals or groups of people who are distant in various ways from researchers' primary places of work....It allows participants the opportunity to construct their narratives at a pace which suits them, unlike the constrained time and space they might experience in a face-to-face or telephonic interview. (pp. 47-48)

They also identify challenges associated with online interviews, such as the potential for very slow response times in asynchronous interviews, and difficulty judging when participants have finished responding to a question in synchronous interviews. James and Busher point out that online interviews "should not be perceived as an 'easy option'" (p. 40), but should be selected only when researchers can justify the appropriateness of the method for their specific studies.

Many of the issues that qualitative researchers need to consider in an online research context are the same as those of research conducted offline. These include making sure that a qualitative research methodology is appropriate for the research goals, that there is a fit between one's research objectives and research design, addressing researcher bias, and employing rigor in the data analysis process. Some unique issues arise in the online research context; however, when it comes to considerations of ethics and the credibility of data and findings.

I found the discussion of ethical considerations to be the most pertinent and valuable dimension of *Online Interviewing*. While I was surprised that the authors did not discuss the Institutional Review Board process in terms of qualitative research in the online context, I was pleased to read their clear opinion regarding obtaining the informed consent of participants in online settings. Referring to the practice of passive observation of online communication known as "lurking," James and Busher state,

"Lurking" on newsgroups and online communities is an invasion of privacy. It is an illegitimate use of power to survey people's activities through technological means without first gaining their permission. (p. 86)

They state further that the mere fact some forms of online communication are available to the public does not mean that the online community members think of their communication with one another as public. For this reason, the authors advocate that researchers identify themselves at the outset of their research. In addition, they highlight the importance of informing potential participants how data would be stored and disseminated and how their identities and privacy would be protected.

Apart from ethical considerations, there are unique issues related to the credibility of data and findings gathered through online interviewing. How can researchers be sure that participants are who they claim to be? How can they be sure that email messages are written by the person who is associated with a given email address? James and Busher suggest that "it is the way in which participants' stories are constructed and the consistency with which they present themselves that provides the strongest reassurance to researchers of the trustworthiness of their accounts whether in online research or face-to-face research" (p. 67). However, this remains a problematic aspect of online interviewing.

The notion of identity as constructed, as multiple, as fragmented, is relevant to qualitative researchers whether they are conducting interviews online or face-to-face. The fact that participants are likely to engage in impression management may be true in any research setting (Goffman, 1959). What is different in the online environment, of course, is that researchers don't have access to the nonverbal cues that convey over 90% of the emotional meaning of a message (Beebe, Beebe, & Redmond, 2008). James and Busher feel that the disadvantage of being deprived of nonverbal communication (assuming one is not using Skype or some other audio-visual online technology) is offset by the fact that in asynchronous interviews participants have more time to reflect on their answers. The authors feel this strengthens the authenticity of their responses. I wonder, though, whether it doesn't also give participants the opportunity to frame their responses in keeping with their efforts at impression management, thus detracting from the authenticity of their responses. While a participant's considered response might be more detailed, his or her spontaneous answer may at times be more revealing of genuine emotion and his or her strongest opinions on any given topic. The authors suggest that one way to strengthen the reliability of data is to combine online interviews with face-to-face interviews. This would require physical proximity, however, which is at odds with the idea mentioned earlier of employing online interviewing in order to contact people in distant locations.

In addition to addressing types of online interviews and methods that researchers might use in the online context, James and Busher provide a thoughtful discussion of how matters of epistemology, culture, and power relate to research in the online environment. In fact, I think the title of their book does not do justice to the breadth of their subject matter. They make a valuable contribution to an understanding of the context of research online by sharing their reflections on these important aspects of the subject.

At the same time, in light of the title of the book, I had anticipated finding more information regarding the procedural choices and steps related to interview design, sampling and recruitment strategies, and data analysis as contextualized by the online environment. For example, when the authors note that "analysing the data that emerges through online research conversations is both problematic and fascinating" (p. 98), I hoped to find more discussion of data analysis of online interviews beyond reference to that fact that one can use a variety of types of analysis such as content analysis or narrative analysis and so forth. James and Busher do include "practical tips for online researchers" at the end of each chapter. In addition, the examples the authors include from studies that employed online interviewing are helpful and interesting.

Given the central role of computers in the everyday lives of millions of people around the world, the subject of online interviewing will surely gain increasing attention in the coming months and years. In *Online Interviewing*, James and Busher have made a useful contribution to the ongoing discussion regarding the applications and advantages of online research methodologies. In addition, they have provided a thoughtful, valuable discussion of vital epistemological and ethical considerations related to this subject.

You can sample James and Busher's work by going to their book's Sage web site located at <http://www.uk.sagepub.com/booksProdDesc.nav?prodId=Book231519&> and downloading the Introduction and Chapter One. There you can also review the complete table of contents. Their web page also includes a searchable Google Books Preview feature that allows you to scroll through selected pages throughout the text. These options

should give you plenty of opportunities to sample *Online Interviewing* online and gain a sense of the theoretical, epistemological, methodological, and ethical approach James and Busher take towards exploring this increasingly mainstream data generation and collection procedures.

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Robin Cooper is a doctoral candidate in Conflict Analysis and Resolution at Nova Southeastern University and is an adjunct professor in the Division of Social and Behavioral Sciences at the university's Farquhar College of Arts and Sciences. She also serves as *The Weekly Qualitative Report's* Reviews Editor and as an Associate Editor for *The Qualitative Report*. Robin's research interests include culture and ethnic conflict, national belonging, collective identity, gender and social control, and qualitative research. Her current dissertation research is a phenomenological study of the transition to a majority-minority community. She may be contacted at robicoop@nova.edu.

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