

Review:

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Annette N. Markham & Nancy K. Baym (Eds.) (2009). Internet Inquiry: Conversations About Method. Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore: Sage, xix+243 pages, ISBN 978-1-4129-1000-2 (cloth) \$72.95 (US), ISBN 978-1-4129-1001-9 (paperback) \$36.95 (US)

Key words:

internet; method;
methodology;
online/offline data;
reflexivity; privacy;
research ethics;
local; global

Abstract: As suggested by the title, this edited collection of articles is aimed at creating a dialogue on crosscutting epistemological and methodological issues relating to qualitative internet study. The scope of the book is not to provide quick tips, but rather encourage the reader to seek new methods of conducting online research. The book is creatively structured into six parts, each one addressing a key question on methods. In addition to the two editors' contributions, 13 accomplished scholars from various disciplines intelligibly respond and share their own qualitative research experiences in online environments, providing a precise and valuable contribution to current debates in internet studies.

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1. Overview of the Book

Annette N. MARKHAM and Nancy K. BAYM's edited volume accomplishes a daunting task. Besides the editors' contributions, 13 scholars have contributed creative pieces—structured into 18 articles—resulting in a book that distinctively accomplishes its promise: a multi-vocal academic conversation on methods. The collection is heartening for the reader, especially one just starting out in the field of qualitative online research, with new ways of (re)thinking, (re)structuring, and (re)positioning themselves with a reflexive approach. [1]

In addition to a meticulous introduction by the editors, the book is structured into six parts, each of which addresses a specific question within the sphere of "conducting, reading, and teaching qualitative internet inquiry" (p.xvi). Under each thematic question, after a main respondent's discussion, two different scholars

coherently express and exemplify their ideas by presenting one or two case stories from their own lived experiences, specifically argued and written with the reflexive approach in mind. At the end of each response, the authors list a short "recommended reading" and include brief notes, which help the reader map the authors' theoretical and methodological approaches to the issues discussed. Moreover, the comprehensible language of the book aptly sustains an easy read, helping the reader engage in discussions on the complex dimensions of internet research. [2]

2. Hearing the Conversations

From the very first page, the book captures the reader's interest with the intriguing proposal of spelling "internet" with a lower-case "i." The editors argue that "capitalizing suggests that 'internet' is a proper noun and implies either that it is a being, like Nancy or Annette, or that it is a specific place, like Madison or Lawrence." They go on to argue that "both metaphors lead to granting the internet agency and power that are better granted to those who develop and use it" (p.vii). With such an opening argument, it can be expected that the editors' academic interpretation will inspire many readers and influence current ways of contextualizing the notion of internet. [3]

"The process of conducting qualitative internet research—indeed all qualitative research, and arguably all research—is more complex than ever before" (p.xix) note the editors, while summarizing the following six basic points discussed throughout the book. 1) Research should be taken into account as a process that inevitably requires reframing theories and methods in relation to the content of data. 2) The reflexive approach is a crucial tool that may ease the pain of making decisions during the data-collection process. 3) Research ethics should be one of the main priorities of the researcher throughout the research process. 4) The dialogue between the researcher's self and the research subject should be taken into account in developing the reflexive approach. 5) Researchers should be aware of their situated practice and knowledge throughout the research process to sustain accountability. 6) The researcher's reflexive insight in solving dialectical tensions (e.g. depth vs. breadth, local vs. global) is likely to have a significant impact on accomplishing the research project. [4]

Anticipating critique, it is clearly stated by the editors that the book's scope is limited to qualitative research methods; however, after reading the introduction one is left with a sense that some degree of explanation as to why discussions on quantitative research methods were left out entirely would be enlightening for the reader, especially in an era of mass quantitative data flow through social networks that gather millions of "user profiles." Even a short debate on the topic would almost certainly enrich the book's scope by demonstrating the tensions between data collection in qualitative and quantitative research contexts. [5]

2.1 Defining borders

Christine HINE's response to the book's first question, "How can qualitative internet researchers define the boundaries of their projects?", highlights the complexity of defining the limits of research, especially when that research is concerned with evolving internet technologies (p.4). For her analysis she draws upon her own research notes, which may relieve readers' anxieties about determining the limits of an ethnographic study, especially for those first embarking upon qualitative online research. HINE suggests that novice researchers in their initial stages of research should outline in a detailed map the "what" and "where" of conducting a research study and use it as a practical tool in controlling the collection of data. However, due to the complex and fluid dynamics of social environments, such as social internet networks, the application of planned methods may not be feasible. In this respect, HINE proposes finding relevant and creative methods and elaborating these through a reflexive approach. Next, Lori KENDALL explores the potential obstacles in setting up a research framework on the slippery grounds of qualitative study by suggesting that the reader conceptualize their work in "spatial, temporal and relational" terms (p.22). Drawing upon her MySpace online experience, Danah BOYD highlights an important methodological issue: decision making in terms of how and when to conclude one's research. First, reminding the reader that "learning to do ethnography is a life-long process" (p.28), BOYD goes on to outline six helpful hints for newcomers to the field of qualitative inquiry: 1) By reading previous ethnographies, researchers can elaborate their study questions and strengthen ways of "seeing" to overcome obstacles during research. 2) Researchers should begin developing a reflexive approach by bearing in mind that the field is a messy cultural context. 3) Ethnographic work is about writing and documenting. 4) Conducting ethnographic work may require intensive data collection and problem solving. Through a reflexive approach, researchers should convert obstacles to positive field experiences. 5) Realizing the boundaries of a research leads to establishing the scope of a research. 6) The interpretation of collected data requires reflexivity and creativity. [6]

2.2 Making sense

In response to the second question, "How can researchers make sense of the issues involved in collecting and interpreting online and offline data?", Shani OGAD explores historical methodological and epistemological tensions in collecting and using online and offline data in internet research. OGAD argues that early discussions on internet inquiry have tended to focus on the importance of collecting both online and offline data in the name of high-quality analysis. However, in this era of emerging new complex and integrated technologies, OGAD demonstrates that the internet has generated its own sense, the virtual reality. In this respect, she argues that, depending on the focus and subject of research, a fruitful analysis can be produced by collecting online data only. To substantiate her argument, OGAD relies on her field experience with women suffering from breast cancer, in which she used both online and offline data for analysis. OGAD concludes that researchers should make certain reflexive

decisions in choosing relevant online and/or offline methods, and justify their data accordingly for accountable research results. Next, Maria BAKARDJIEVA in her chapter reformulates the question under discussion: "Why is the issue of grappling with online and offline data important, or is it?" (p.54). Reflecting on her online field experience with bloggers, BAKARDJIEVA outlines the notion of reflexivity in relation to the researcher's interest in collecting data and producing knowledge by posing the question: "What is the research subject?" (p.55). Radhika GAJJALA's answer to OGAD's comments analytically seeks ways of collecting data situated in the "binary distinctions" of online and offline data (p.61). GAJJALA's discussion of the researcher's bodily material practices (e.g. typing) and reflexive manners in online research makes a valuable contribution to reconsidering the contradictions of material vs. virtual self. [7]

2.3 Considering privacy

In her contribution, Malin Sveningsson ELM's deals with the question, "How do various notions of privacy influence decisions in qualitative internet research?" She outlines the meaning of privacy, stressing "the individual's integrity and right to self-determination" (p.69). By raising the question, "How can we as researchers make sense of the variables 'private' and 'public' to better judge the appropriateness and ethical soundness of our studies?" (p.70), she opens a debate touching upon issues such as privacy and ethics, and more importantly, the role of obtaining online/offline consent (p.70). Her chapter includes an important discussion on the determining elements of what constitutes a public, semi-public and private internet site. In answer to the question, ELM suggests that researchers explore website access criteria (e.g. can anyone with an internet connection access the site?) and level of exclusivity (e.g. are there any restriction rules in terms of the number of eligible members?) (pp.75-78). Furthermore, ELM recommends that researchers take into account the various ethical guidelines (e.g. those of the Swedish Research Council or the Association of Internet Researchers) in examining the spatial dimensions of websites. Elizabeth A. BUCHANAN responds to this inquiry into privacy by emphasizing the limits and extent of control during internet research. By focusing on the role of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), particularly in the U.S. context, she stresses a similar argument to ELM's discussion on the importance of involving national and international internet research guidelines for an accountable and ethical study. Presenting her experience on teen girls' self-expression practices on personal home pages, Susannah R. STERN's inquiry raises crucial questions on establishing privacy, confidentiality and anonymity in internet research (e.g. who should be responsible for deciding on the anonymity of research subjects and collected data? The researcher, research participants, or both?). For STERN, solutions may vary depending on the context of the research, and can be discussed with research subjects through a reflexive approach. [8]

2.4 Involving gender and sexuality

Lori KENDALL's response to the question, "How do issues of gender and sexuality influence the structures and processes of qualitative internet research?", seeks analytical connections by emphasizing the online researcher's body and the erotic. Based on her internet research experiences with the websites Blue Sky and LiveJournal, her discussion on knowledge production in ethnographic studies at the intersection of ethics and sexuality coherently addresses the usage of power during fieldwork. Jenny SUNDEN goes on to elaborate on KENDALL's discussions "in the spirit of confessional ethnographic reflexivity" (p.119). SUNDEN's contribution, based on her reflexive account of a two-year online ethnography in which she chose to conduct only "online interviews" in the name of understanding online culture "on its own terms" (p.119), highlights dilemmas around the crosscutting issues of conducting internet research in online (sexual) environments. In other words, she highlights the potential risks of presenting intimate thoughts and texts created and developed between researcher and research subject in the name of conducting reflexive research in traditional academic environments, and asks if there are any ways of developing "ethically responsible risk-taking" (p.123). SUNDEN argues that researchers should be aware of the academic environments to which they belong and present research results in such a way as to prevent any future complications. For her, such efforts made in the name of reflexive analysis "might backfire in an academic context of departmental hierarchies and traditional gender politics" (p.123). John Edward CAMPBELL's contribution to KENDALL's argument focuses on "the theoretical and methodological considerations confronting the researcher when studying sexual communities in cyberspace" (p.125), by discussing his own field experience conducting reflexive online ethnography in gay bear culture. [9]

2.5 Producing the meaningful

MARKHAM maintains a fruitful debate on the intersections of conducting ethnographic study at local and global levels in response to the question, "How can qualitative researchers produce work that is meaningful across time, space and culture?" Drawing upon on her personal field experience in the Virgin Islands (U.S.A.), where she faced electricity cuts for several hours while conducting online research, she reflexively demonstrates some of the possible "material" obstacles and challenges of carrying out local qualitative work in a global context. Furthermore, MARKHAM reminds the reader that the researcher's local cultural assumptions and situatedness are not independent from the interpretation of research data (pp.143-147). In this vein, her debate is a particularly valuable one towards developing an interpretive and reflexive qualitative approach. Elaine LALLY's contribution to MARKHAM's debate highlights the issue of situatedness in conducting ethnographic research by touching upon issues such as feeling at home, reflexivity, creativity, and the role of the researcher's emotions, e.g. being surprised or experiencing wonder during qualitative study. Raising the important question, "What value will our work have in 5 years, 15 years, 150 years?" (p.159), LALLY depicts a map of possible directions (e.g. making academic presentations outside the researcher's own country, or online publications) that a

research project may take on a local and global level by the time it is completed. In the next response, Ramesh SRINIVASAN expands on MARKHAM's discussion by highlighting the significant role of emerging transnational networks in qualitative research design. [10]

2.6 Constituting quality

BAYM's answer to the question, "What constitutes quality in qualitative internet research?", aims at providing "some guidelines for conducting 'good' qualitative internet research" (p.173) while summing up previous responses in the book. Furthermore, she raises an important issue on the obstacles of carrying out qualitative internet research within the strict methodological limitations of various traditional disciplines (p.177). With particular emphasis on developing pragmatic solutions to potential academic restrictions, she suggests a list of criteria to enhance the strength and quality of qualitative internet studies. For BAYM, a high-quality qualitative internet study should primarily demonstrate a grounding in theory and data while displaying thoroughness and multiple methods of data collection and analysis. Furthermore, the study should include the research subject's perspective in its analysis with the use of a reflexive approach, and should explore their world by demonstrating the "interconnections between the internet and the life-world within which it is situated" (p.179). Certainly, the accounts she relates could be of use to any researcher, especially one new to the field of qualitative inquiry. In addition to BAYM's suggestions, MARKHAM, with a particular interest in the multiple meanings and flexible structures of "qualitative inquiry" (p.190), outlines a list of suggestions and basic questions, such as "Who is doing the research?" (p.193), and elaborates with a debate on methodological decision making, knowledge production, and accountability. However, in all these personal and reflexive inquiries, the idea of conducting political inquiries within the field of qualitative research is one of the least discussed. In other words, a debate on the intersection of ethics, methodology and politics would prove useful in determining the weight of potential socio-political change—something that every qualitative inquiry should take into account. [11]

3. Conclusion

For many graduate students, and perhaps even senior researchers, methodology texts are often considered "dry." In this sense, MARKHAM and BAYM's edited collection is a unique and ground-breaking book. It is an enjoyable read that does not admit a moment's boredom under some authoritarian voice. Although the book is recommended for graduate students, its creative style and well-organized structure are sure to make it one of the handbooks used by many senior researchers in their teaching. [12]

Overall, this book is strongly recommended for graduate students and researchers, particularly in the fields of sociology, anthropology, gender, and cyber/internet studies. Lastly, in this present day, when the potential changes of semantic web technologies are being explored (and perhaps even more far-reaching changes, i.e. the ubiquitous Web 4.0 envisioned to connect intelligence

between human and machine), it would seem that a new task awaits the editors in near future: an edited collection of conversations dedicated to internet inquiry on Web 3.0 and Web 4.0 technologies. [13]

Author

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Citation

Biricik, Alp (2010). Review: Annette N. Markham & Nancy K. Baym (Eds.) (2009). Internet Inquiry: Conversations About Method [13 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 11(3), Art. 9, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs100396>.