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1 Introduction

In 1999, Beaudouin and Velkovska introduced 'the Cyberians' to the academic world (Beaudouin and Velkovska 1999). These were not, as they may initially sound, some terrifying Dr Who monsters designed to send researchers rushing behind the sofa, but were actually members of an online community made up of users of a French internet service provider. Beaudouin and Velkovska analysed over 5000 messages posted on message boards, looked at the way individuals presented themselves on their homepages, interviewed eight of the Cyberians and received survey responses from an additional forty-two. Their main questions were essentially these – was it possible to describe the Cyberians as a community and, if so, what kind of community could exist made up of people who might never speak, touch, make eye-contact or meet?

Beaudouin and Velkovska concluded that the Cyberians did form a new kind of virtual community, but they also noted that the 'study raises more questions than it provides answers' (Beaudouin and Velkovska 1999: 8), and concluded that a whole new raft of research would be needed to understand this 'quickly expanding new social universe' (Beaudouin and Velkovska 1999: 9). They were not the first social researchers to investigate the internet, or to use online research methods for that investigation, but re-reading their study thirteen years later serves as a reminder of how quickly technology and social responses to technology move on. The online experience of community, which Beaudouin and Velkovska find in Cyberia, has now become a commonplace reality for millions, possibly even billions, of web users across the world. Through email lists, discussion boards and increasingly through social media such as Facebook and Twitter, social life and social interaction is something that happens online as much, or more, than it happens face-to-face.

The current generation of internet users are connected through social tools, and access online spaces through phones, televisions and gaming consoles as well as laptops and desktop computers. This generation would

probably not describe themselves as belonging to online communities or see themselves as neo-Cyberians. Rather, they would see their online interactions as part of a wider, more inclusive, sense of the social. For most people Facebook does not foster the creation of an alternative online community, but rather supports the building and maintenance of face-to-face relationships (Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe 2007; Madge, Meek, Wellens and Hooley 2009; Burke, Kraut and Marlow 2011). Shirky summarizes this change, saying

the old view of online as a separate space, cyberspace, apart from the real world, was an accident of history. Back when the online population was tiny, most of the people you knew in your daily life weren't part of that population. Now that computers and increasingly computer-like phones have been broadly adopted, the whole notion of cyberspace is fading. Our social media tools aren't an alternative to real life, they are part of it. (Shirky 2010: 537.)

Online research methods have been developed quickly and in response to rapid social and technological changes. The social world is being fundamentally reshaped, and it has been necessary for social research methods to respond to this change. As chapter 2 argues, the technologies which online research methods use are new in themselves, and the methodologies are even newer. Furthermore, as new technologies are created, social researchers have viewed them hungrily and sought to re-purpose them to the task of finding out about and understanding the social world.

This book, however, rejects the idea that the technology begets the methodology in any simple and straightforward way, and seeks to detail the inter-relationships between technologies, social forms and the methodologies that researchers use to investigate them. So the methodologies that a researcher might use to investigate something like the social gaming environment World of Warcraft (WoW) are shaped in response to the technology (what WoW allows users to do, what data it facilitates), and the social aspects of playing the game (why people play WoW and what kind of interactions they have). However, online research methods are also shaped by the rich methodological traditions that online researchers have to draw on. All of this talk of newness should not be allowed to obscure the fact that online research methods build on existing onsite research methods. Because of this, the core of this book has been organized around four chapters which detail how different methodologies are translated

and reframed for the online environment: surveys in chapter 4; interviews and focus groups in chapter 5; ethnographies in chapter 6; experiments in chapter 7.

Online research methodologies therefore describe the approaches that researchers take, rather than the tools that they use. As this book will show, there has been a methodological conversation about online social research that has emerged out of wider methodological discussions. It begins from the question of how do researchers find out about and make sense of the social world, and particularly pursues that question in the context of the online environment. Online research methods do not describe an approach to finding out about the internet, but rather they describe an approach to finding out about people and the social world they inhabit, using the internet. Obviously along the course of that journey much is likely to be discovered about the technologies people use and how they use them, but that does not need to be the aim of every study that uses online research methods.

One of the biggest challenges that online researchers face is negotiating the ethical and legal complexity of the internet, and the new social formations that accompany it. As O'Hara and Shadbolt have argued, the culture of self-disclosure online has combined with increases in computing power to reshape what is understood by personal privacy (O'Hara and Shadbolt 2008). Legal and ethical frameworks are still struggling to catch up with these challenges, and the social researcher is at times left with little clear guidance. What is private and what is public is no longer clear, nor is it clear who has the legal right to give consent for the use of personal data in a world where proprietary software companies own enormous repositories of individuals' personal data. Add onto this that much online activity exists under multi-jurisdictional regulation, and that most states struggle to enforce regulations in relation to the internet. The online researcher is clearly in a challenging position, which is unlikely to be resolved through reference to a guidance booklet. Chapter 3 addresses these issues in more detail, and attempts to chart a pathway through them.

The audience for this book has been imagined as computer literate (but not techie) researchers with some experience of undertaking research in a face-to-face environment, but little or no experience of researching online. Because the book discusses a wide range of methodological traditions, and explores how they have been translated into online methods, each of the chapters is aimed at a non-specialist audience. While it does not

attempt to provide a basic grounding in social science research, suggestions will be made of texts that can provide this grounding in each of the areas. This book also provides a glossary, to assist with the technological terminology that the online researcher is required to master.

One of the biggest challenges in working with online research methods is that none of the methods has developed within disciplinary silos. Researchers in education, sociology, geography, psychology, economics and many other disciplines have been re-conceptualizing their approaches, and have been exploring how their methodological paradigms are reshaped by the use of online tools. In many cases this has led to creative inter-disciplinary cross-fertilization; however, this eclecticism can make the literatures difficult to access. Furthermore, it can present those attempting to synthesize the literature with an additional challenge of negotiating different epistemologies. This book reflects this inter-disciplinarity, and draws on a broad review of literatures in relevant disciplines without trying to resolve difference or privilege any particular approach. It does not claim to be a comprehensive literature review, but rather to provide an introductory text that is strongly grounded in published academic work.

There are lots of other excellent books that deal with the subject of online research methods. Many of them are discussed in chapter 2 and elsewhere throughout this book. However, as chapter 2 argues, relatively few books have as broad a focus as this volume. There are notable exceptions to this, and it is useful to draw the reader's attention to Hine, Fielding *et al.*, Hesse-Biber and Leavy, and Gaiser and Schreiner, as particularly useful and comprehensive sources (Hine 2005; Fielding, Lee and Blank 2008; Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2008; Gaiser and Schreiner 2009). However, the speed of change in online technologies and methods means that there is considerable value in revisiting these issues regularly to explore how changes have reshaped methodological practices. This book therefore provides an up-to-date, comprehensive, multi-disciplinary work that maps the whole field of online research methods within the context of a rapidly changing technological landscape.

It is also important to note that online research methods cover a far wider set of approaches and strategies than the current volume can hope to address. For example, while the subject of online content analysis is touched on in chapter 6, it is not possible to do justice to it here. Other areas like online Delphi (Avery, Savelyich, Sheikh, Cantrill, Morris, Fernando, Bainbridge, Horsfield and Teasdale 2005) or usability

and ergonomics (Rodriguez and Resnick 2010) are passed over altogether. However, in chapter 8 an attempt is made to look at 'where next for online research methods', and to deal with some of the more recent or more challenging areas of online research.

The book is designed to be read as a whole, although it is recognized that many people will dip into particular chapters as they embark on a particular project. However, while online research methods have to be understood as multi-faceted, there are challenges that are faced by all methodological approaches online. Because of this there is a considerable amount of cross-referral between chapters, and the online researcher will gain something by exploring the lessons that have been learnt in different methodological traditions.

It is hoped that this volume can provide new online researchers with insights about how to go about undertaking online research. It aims to offer practical solutions, without pretending that there is a one-size-fits-all approach to online research. It is also hoped that it can play a role in the cross-fertilization of ideas across different disciplines and methodological traditions. In a world populated by Cyberians, it is possible to argue that online research methods are too important to ignore.

Further reading

There is a wealth of good writing about current development in technology and the internet. Good starting points include *Here Comes Everybody* (Shirky 2009), which deals with the social and political implications of social media; *Everything Is Miscellaneous* (Weinberger 2008), which discusses the nature of information and authority online; *The Spy in The Coffee Machine* (O'Hara and Shadbolt 2008), which discusses the issue of privacy.

There are also a number of other introductions to the area of online research methods. *The Internet Research Handbook* (O'Dochartaigh 2001); *Internet Research Methods* (Hewson, Yule, Laurent and Vogel 2002) and *Online Research Essentials* (Russell and Purcell 2009) all offer good places to get started.

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