

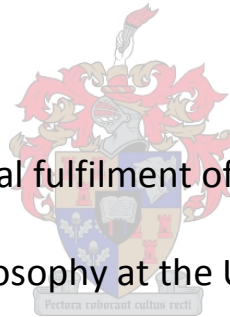
# **Qualitative Internet Research:**

Its objects, methods and ethical challenges

by

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degree of Master of Philosophy at the University of Stellenbosch



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## **DECLARATION**

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## ABSTRACT

Throughout its relative short history, the Internet has attracted a multiplicity of researchers whose engagement with the new technology has taken many different forms. The growing number and diversity of quantitative and qualitative studies on and of the Internet demonstrate its usefulness as data collection tool and its potential as significant research object. Based on the assumption that the Internet is amenable to empirical investigation, qualitative researchers have employed established research methods, which have been adapted in a number of innovative ways, in order to explore the object 'Internet'.

This thesis describes the objects and methods of such qualitative Internet research and illustrates their application by way of study examples. The objects of the Internet are presented in chronological order, starting with the first application, the email and concluding with the most recent Internet service, the Web 2.0. The qualitative research methods that have been adapted to suit the online environment include ethnography, text analysis, case study design and participatory research methods. The study examples that follow portray the diversity of the qualitative Internet enquiries that have been conducted since the early 1990s. The methodological and ethical challenges that Internet researchers encountered as result of the particular characteristics of the object of the study are addressed within the context of the studies.

While the review of the studies did confirm the viability of the online environment as field for qualitative research, it also pointed out that those, who intend to conduct qualitative Internet studies, should take note of the substantial complexities that such enquiries entail.

## OPSOMMING

Regdeur sy relatiewe kort geskiedenis het die Internet 'n menigvuldigheid van navorsers aangetrek wie se verbintenis met die nuwe tegnologie verskillende vorms aangeneem het. Die groeiende aantal en verskeidenheid van kwantitatiewe en kwalitatiewe studies op en van die internet demonstreer sy nut as dataversamelingshulpmiddel en sy potensiaal as beduidende studie-objek. Gegrand op die aanname dat die Internet vatbaar is vir empiriese navorsing, het kwalitatiewe navorsers gevestigde navorsingsmetodes, wat in 'n aantal innoverende maniere aangepas is, toegepas om die voorwerp "Internet" te ondersoek.

Hierdie tesis beskryf die objekte en metodes van sodanige kwalitatiewe internet navorsing en illustreer die toepassing daarvan by wyse van studie voorbeelde. Die objekte van die internet word in chronologiese volgorde aangebied, wat begin by die eerste toepassing, die e-pos en eindig met die mees onlangse internet-diens, die Web 2.0. Die kwalitatiewe navorsingsmetodes wat aangepas is na gelang van die aanlyn-omgewing behels etnografie, teks analise, gevallestudie ontwerp en deelnemende navorsingsmetodes. Die studie voorbeelde wat volg beskryf die diversiteit van kwalitatiewe internetnavorsing wat gedoen is sedert die vroeë 1990's. Die metodologiese en etiese uitdagings, wat internet navorsers teëgekome het as gevolg van die besondere kenmerke van die objek van die studie, is binne die konteks van die studies bespreek.

Terwyl die bespreking van die studies die lewensvatbaarheid van die aanlyn-omgewing as veld vir kwalitatiewe navorsing bevestig het, wys dit ook daarop dat diegene, wat van voorneme is om kwalitatiewe internetnavorsing aan te pak, kennis moet neem van die groot uitdagings wat sulke navorsing behels.

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I dedicate this thesis to my children, Birke and Thorsten.

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## INTRODUCTION

The term 'Internet research' is a complex notion referring a diverse range of research in the natural and social sciences as well as humanities; a multiplicity of methodological paradigms and research methods and a wide range of study objectives. The research object – the Internet – is in itself not 'One thing', but includes many 'individual' technologies that are increasingly being merged with others. The concurrent development from a primarily textual form to include visual, audio and kinetic features has led to a significant increase in the different kinds of online communication and activities that can be accessed by its users (Garcia et al, 2009; Anderson, 2007).

In view of this multimodal nature of the research object and the disciplinary diversity of scholars involved, the academic status of 'Internet research' is far from certain. The theme of the 'Information Society' journal's special issue in 2005 framed this debate by addressing the current and future status of Internet research as an academic 'field' or 'discipline'. The response to the question whether Internet research – conceived broadly as information and communication technology (ICT) studies – might be considered a discipline, is a unanimous 'No' (Baym, 2005: 229). Contributions by scholars from diverse disciplines – such as communication, economics, cultural studies and sociology – concurred that Internet research does not constitute a 'field' as yet and even '(i)f there is a field, it is only by using the term in its broadest sense that we can fit an Internet studies to what it means.'(Jones, 2005: 233). Addressing this multiplicity of Internet research, Hunsinger observed that as a field it is 'somewhat indefinable' because the object of study '...is so extensive and ever-changing that we have generalized the referent "Internet" to encompass nearly every perspective in relation to the technology.'(Hunsinger, 2005: 277). Baron commented on the diversity of 'disciplinary practitioners' that '...use a common tool in diverse ways (qualitative, quantitative, aesthetic, etc.) to understand a wide swath of problems (e.g., social, linguistic, political, technological).'

(Baron, 2005: 270). In this sense, Internet research



is ‘...a new field without an established canon of texts, theories, and methodologies’ and researchers ‘...must draw upon existing disciplinary resources as they develop an emerging body of scholarship.’(Monberg, 2005: 281).

In order to place this brief account of the current status of Internet research in chronological perspective, a synopsis of the history of the Internet and a short review of the development of Internet-based research follow.

### **A short history of the Internet**

The beginnings of the Internet can be traced back to the year 1969 when the first message was transmitted between two computers through ARPANET, the forerunner of the present-day Internet. Funded by the Department of Defence ARPA (Advanced Research Projects Agency), access to this resource sharing network was limited to scientists involved in its development, who used it primarily to conduct research in computer science. (Kleinrock, 2004: 194). When in 1972 a ‘hands-on’ demonstration was organised to introduce the ARPANET to new prospective users, a surprising – and in hindsight a very telling – outcome was the intensive use made of the electronic mail service (e-mail), an application that was not intended to be a major one. Besides serving its primary purpose of scientific clarifications and discussions, users soon realised its value and usefulness as personal message medium so that by 1973 email traffic already made up 75% of the overall net traffic (Kirpal & Vogel, 2006: 141).

As early as the mid seventies, other disciplines and organisations, such as the National Science Foundation and commercial companies like IBM, entered the field. Having realised the usefulness of networking technologies, computer networks ‘...began springing up wherever funding was found for the purpose’ (Leiner, 1997: 105). By 1985, the Internet had advanced to the stage of an established technology that not only supported the scientific community’s endeavours, but that was also increasingly used by others for day-to-day communications (Leiner, 1997: 105).

In 1993 the most pervasive application of the Internet, the World Wide Web (WWW) was functioning effectively and its user-friendly interface and capabilities attracted the attention of a worldwide audience. The first version, Web 1.0 was 'all about connecting people'; an 'interactive space' (Anderson, 2007: 5) where people could create their own web sites and thereby '...contribute their creative ideas, knowledge and works and make them available to others interactively on the Internet' (Kleinrock, (2004: 195). Ongoing technological Web developments have enhanced and refined these features of social interactivity, making the newest version Web 2.0 '...a more socially connected Web in which people can contribute as much as they can consume' (Anderson, 2007: 4). Of these newer Web-based services that found great appeal, especially amongst the younger users, are the social networking sites that allow users to construct personal profiles and connect with others, whoever and wherever they may be.

An aspect about the Internet that made it so appealing to its ever increasing number of users is to be found in its design philosophy. The basic tenets such as no centralised control authority but shared responsibilities by all parts; no restrictions of the kind of data to be transmitted and a sense of trust and sharing amongst the members of the 'cyberspace community' contributed to the Internet's 'legacy of open access and use' (Kleinrock, 2004: 197). However, in the decades to follow, this lack of centralised control and the pervasive access to others combined with optional anonymity also facilitated deviant behaviour online. The term 'cyber crime', now widely used to describe this 'dark side to the Internet' (Kleinrock, 2004: 194) includes both traditional offenses such as fraud and pornography as well as 'unique technological crimes' such as spam, hacking, viruses, denial of service, and copyright infringement (Gale Encyclopedia of Everyday Law: 1019).

## **A Brief Review of Internet Research**

The development of Internet research has closely followed the trajectory of the object itself as the ‘...targets of research continue to follow shifts in technological development’ (Markham, 2005: 798). Broadly speaking, three phases may be identified: the early years of the 1980’s that coincided with novel access to email and the forerunners of other text-based technologies such as Usenet; the middle phase that witnessed the launch of the World Wide Web and the current phase that more or less covers research conducted in the new millennium where Internet technologies were enhanced and refined (Web 2.0) and wireless devices such as the iPhone and iPod that can be used in tandem with the desktop Internet, were developed (Danet, 2002; Herring, 2004a; Hine, 2005; Markham, 2005; Wellman, 2004).

### *The early phase*

Wellman (2004) described this phase as one where ‘...punditry rides rampant’. Utopian forecasts of the Internet as an ‘egalitarian and global-spanning...technological marvel’ and dystopian visions of a world where electronic communication would dominate and impoverish social interactions (Wellman, 2004: 124) were promoted in books, news coverage and films. Drawing on authors such as John Perry Barlow, Danet et al (1997) vividly portrayed the more euphoric version of the Internet by comparing it ‘...with the 19th Century West. It is vast, unmapped, culturally and legally ambiguous, verbally terse..., hard to get around in, and up for grabs.’ (Danet et al, 1997: online).

Internet research conducted during this phase was inspired by these accounts that ‘...caught the imagination of scholars and significantly influenced the tone of the research.’(Markham, 2005: 797). Study reports accordingly varied from describing the Internet as a lean, impoverished medium to accounts of a rich virtual space.

In the early phase of the 1980’s researchers were mainly concerned with the effect of the new medium, focusing on the impact of computers on interaction. Psychological

studies using experimental designs examined topics such as the effectiveness of email communication in the decision-making processes within an organisational context (Williams, 2007: 7). Social psychologists interested in group processes set up experiments to determine the effect of media on group functioning whereby differences found in the latter was hypothesised to be related to the 'inherent differences' between media (Hine, 2000: 15). The findings suggested that computer-mediated communication was inherently '...cold, anonymous, and lacking in "social presence" because of the absence of non-verbal cues such as facial expression...' (Danet, 2002: 4). The 'reduced social cues' model that was established through these studies was influential in establishing the view that computer-mediated communication was 'inherently constrained' (Hine, 2000: 15 - 16).

At the same time, studies that used a different methodological approach – such as field studies – established the opposite, namely, that online communication was essentially social and that meaningful social relations emerged from online encounters. Researchers working within the qualitative paradigm stressed the 'communicative possibilities' of the Internet. They argued that, instead of assuming that media characteristics determine the kind of interaction mediated, more attention should be paid to the context in which the communication takes place (Baym, 2002; Hine, 2000). An example of scholarly work that stressed these 'communicative possibilities' of online interaction, is Reid's seminal study of communication and community on Internet Relay Chat that was published in 1991 (Reid, 1991). An influential contender of the 'context matters' perspective was Rheingold who maintained that people using CMC did so primarily for social and not task-oriented reasons. He substantiated the existence of such 'virtual communities' with evidence from his own experience of daily social interactions on the WELL (a computer conferencing system) where people formed 'webs of personal relationships in cyberspace' (Rheingold, 2000: xx).

Moving to the 'darker' side of Internet research leads to a number of ethically questionable studies conducted at that time. An exemplar of such research – similar in its notoriety to Laud Humphrey's 'Tearoom Trade' – is the often-quoted 'Cyberporn' study of an undergraduate student that featured as cover story of *Time Magazine* (Thomas, 1996). The controversy that ensued once the study was published did not so much concern its topic – 'Marketing pornography on the Information Superhighway' – but the 'stigmatizing language and context of the article', such as the implicit inference that people who block the monitoring of their sites might be frequent consumers of pornography or worse, paedophiles. In addition names of cities, from which the unsuspecting 'covertly observed' users had phoned, were published in an appendix. Here the legacy of the Internet's 'open use and access' lead to a situation whereby a 'seemingly innocent research project that contained serious ethical lapses' (Thomas, 1996: 191) compromised the privacy and integrity of its uninformed virtual participants.

#### *The middle phase*

Once the World Wide Web (WWW) made its appearance, Internet research proliferated as access to and use of the Net became more widespread and diverse. Building on the insight that online communication is neither inherently impoverished nor leads to complete liberation from constraints such as social hierarchies, and the understanding that online participation enables the formation of 'virtual communities', the attention of researchers of various disciplines now shifted to a more detailed investigation of the relations and structures that emerged from the social, cultural and political formations they encountered on the Internet (Hine, 2000; Markham, 2005). The topics explored included, amongst many others, the way groups are formed and sustained online, identity play, gender roles, online social hierarchies and conflict, benefits (and challenges) of virtual communities, online romance and linguistic features of online text.

Examples of studies that appeared around this time – either as journal articles or books – include ethnographic accounts of an online group, such as the virtual pub on a MUD (Multi-user dimension) (Kendall, 1998) and the virtual lesbian café on a BBS (Bulletin Board System) (Correll, 1995); the ethnography of Internet use in the Third World (Trinidad) (Miller & Slater, 2000); the rhetorical analysis of online gender harassment (Herring, 1999) and of social action in cyberspace (Gurak, 1997); and the discourse analysis of ‘virtual play’ on Internet Relay Chat (Danet et al, 1997).

As each discipline took up the challenge to adapt its research methods to the online environment, publications of Internet research became more scholarly: methods and approaches used were shared at length and current work grounded in previous research. Due to the novelty of the research object ‘Internet’, few resources existed that could have guided researchers otherwise. Even the ground-breaking book *Doing Internet Research* (Jones, 1999) did not offer a comprehensive overview as its contributors elaborated on various theoretical and practical aspects specific to their discipline (Markham, 2005; Mann & Stewart, 2000). Hine (2005b) describes this situation as ‘a valuable reflexive opportunity for traditional disciplines ... to enliven methodological debate in general’. (Hine, 2005b: 245 – 246).

There is no doubt that the Internet presented researchers with an easily accessible, rich data source that was literally ‘up for grabs’. This unprecedented accessibility of data coupled with the ease of doing covert observations within an online setting and the difficulty of obtaining informed consent from ‘virtual’ participants, lead to concerns over ethical conduct in Internet research. A special issue of the ‘Information Society’ (1996) marked the beginning of the debate concerning the appropriateness of applying existing ethical guidelines to research conducted in an environment ‘...that poses complex ethical issues that may lack exact analogues in other types of inquiry.’(Thomas, 1996: 108).

*The current phase*

The new millennium can be considered as a period of consolidation where ‘increased technological integration...combined with assimilation of day-to-day uses’ (Herring, 2004a: 34) has turned the ‘object of fascination’ into a practical necessity (Ibid: 33). Although the refinement of the Internet in the form of Web 2.0 and the introduction of other wireless digital technologies attest to the unrelenting and ongoing technological innovations, the novelty had worn off and the ‘frenzied’ online activities of the late 1990s changed ‘to a world of ordinary people routinely using the Internet.’ (Wellman, 2004: 125). In other words, computer-mediated communication is ‘slouching towards the ordinary’ (Herring, 2004: 27) to the extent that in some settings it has altogether replaced ‘traditional’ modes of communication (letter, telephone, interpersonal) particularly in the economic sphere (Garcia, 2009: 57).

This trend has been observed for Internet research as well. Whereas in the past researchers tended to ‘quickly flock to each technology’ and ‘moved progressively through various forms of computer-mediated communication’, the pace has subsided (Markham, 2005: 798). With the object Internet increasingly becoming part of the ‘ordinary’ day-to-day lives of users, research focus has accordingly shifted from online-only environments and virtual identity to ‘the intersection of computer-mediated communication with everyday life.’(Markham, 2005: 798). The hitherto understood dichotomy of online versus offline or virtual versus real gave way to an understanding that this conceptual boundary is but a contrived one as these two spaces are becoming increasingly merged and ‘interact and transform each other’ (Garcia et al, 2009: 53).

Attention is also being paid to the technical contexts in which online interactions take place since ‘the technical sphere inform(s) human interaction’ and vice versa (Maczewski et al, 2004: 64). Using websites to recruit and interview participants, these authors stress the need for researchers to be both technically knowledgeable and socially aware in order to design a ‘respectful’ research environment. Ley’s (2007)

study on commitment in an online support group explored the way in which social interaction and site architecture ‘...mutually construct one another’ (Ley, 2007: online). Drawing on her own research on web sites, Hine (2001) stresses the importance for researchers to consider both the audience (the social aspect) and the design (capacities of the technology) in the analysis of web pages.

In the same way that adapted methods were refined and studies became more focused and theoretically driven (Wellman, 2004: 127), ethical concerns were also addressed more formally. In 2002, the working committee of the AiOR (Association of Internet Researchers) published a set of guidelines with the goal to ‘...support and inform those responsible for making decisions about the ethics of Internet research.’ (Ess & Association of Internet Researchers Ethics Committee, 2002).

This short review that touched mainly on qualitative studies, aptly demonstrates that Internet Research is not ‘One thing’ but that it embraces a ‘Multitude’ of researchers of various disciplines who employ different and innovative methods to study the Internet in all its diversity. Adding to this complexity is the ever-changing nature of the object, its global reach and simultaneous unequal distribution. Even though it appears incomprehensible, it is nevertheless possible to take a small portion out of this ‘somewhat indefinable’ field Internet research and explore it in more detail, as is the aim of this study: to investigate the object and methods of qualitative Internet research.

The first chapter of the thesis introduces the object and methods of qualitative Internet research. It defines and describes the object Internet and the communication technologies that are embedded within it. The research methods most commonly used to conduct qualitative research on, of and about the Internet are briefly explained.



In Chapter two, the aspects of Internet research discussed so far – the object and the methods – are brought together and illustrated by way of study examples. The variety of qualitative Internet studies that have been conducted over the past fifteen years are testimony to the wealth of knowledge that has been accumulated in ‘...the air of innovation and anxiety around virtual methods...’ (Hine, 2005: 9).

Ethical conduct in online research environments has been debated at length since the middle 1990’s and continues to be a challenge for Internet researchers until today. Accordingly, Chapter three addresses the ethical concerns in qualitative Internet research and reviews some of the problems associated with applying institutional ethical guidelines in an online research setting.

The concluding chapter summarises the issues of qualitative Internet research discussed so far and looks at the way forward, briefly discussing recent developments and methodological innovations in qualitative Internet research.

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## **CHAPTER 1      OBJECTS AND METHODS OF QUALITATIVE INTERNET RESEARCH**

As noted in the introduction, Internet research is neither considered to be a discipline in its own right nor constitutes an established field, but can rather be described as a ‘transient...research network built around the object Internet’ (Hine, 2005: 246). Accommodated within diverse disciplines such as linguistics, psychology, economics, sociology and so forth, Internet researchers rely on traditional research methods which have been adapted in a number of innovative ways in order to investigate the object ‘Internet’. How this object is approached, conceived of and ‘made’ in qualitative Internet studies is the topic of the following section.

### **1.1.    Objects of Qualitative Internet Research**

Defined broadly, the object of a study (or the unit of analysis) is that ‘object, phenomenon, entity, process or event’ the researcher intends to investigate and report on (Babbie & Mouton, 2001: 84). Reflecting on the events or actions in the social world that qualitative researchers typically investigate reveals a great diversity of objects. Ethnographers, for example, most often study ‘larger entities or units of analysis (such as communities, social settings and cultural groups)’, while those undertaking case studies in general select more bounded entities (such as a specific support group or educational programme) (Babbie & Mouton, 1996: 48 – 50) and linguists usually focus on social production of written and oral texts. While the objects differ, common to all these research endeavours is the emphasis on studying the object in its natural context – the setting in which the observed actions and events take place.

With the advent of the Internet researchers were faced with ‘a whole new object of study, with all that it offered in terms of research perspectives to develop and new phenomena to describe’ (Hine, 2005: 241). A review of the various ways in which this new object may be defined, framed and used in qualitative Internet research follows.

## **1.2. The Internet as Object of Qualitative Internet Research**

Markham (2006) noted that how ‘... one defines and frames the Internet influences how one interacts with Internet-based technologies, as well as how one studies the Internet’ (Markham, 2006: 96). A review of the definitions offered by various Internet scholars reveals two broad frames: the Internet perceived as communication medium and research source and considered as object and context of qualitative Internet studies.

### *The Internet as communication medium and research resource*

Scholars will utilise the Internet to communicate with colleagues or employ it as a research resource to recruit and/ or interact with research participants in connection with studies otherwise unrelated to the Internet. In these cases, where the ‘medium’ Internet is perceived as a tool or ‘convenient addition’ to existing communication media (Markham, 2006: 98), the infrastructure of the different services or applications offered by the Internet merit further attention in order ‘to understand the link between the tool and social behaviour’(Joinson, 2003: 22). A detailed description of these will be presented later on.

### *The Internet as object and research context in qualitative research*

Qualitative researchers consider the Internet ‘not simply as a technological tool but as a whole new, constructed environment with its own codes of practice’ (Mann & Stewart, 2000: 7). Viewed from this perspective, the Internet is conceptualised as a place of social interaction, a virtual space that is amenable to qualitative inquiry. Thus, although the actors are ‘visually anonymous’ or ‘disembodied’ and interaction is primarily restricted to text appearing on the computer screen, studies have demonstrated that communication mediated by the technology not only allows for meaningful social interaction to take place, but may also lead to the formation of close relationships amongst participants and the construction of ‘virtual communities’. The term ‘computer-mediated-communication’ (CMC) is widely used to describe these social actions that take place within the different virtual environments. Based on this

understanding of CMC, Hine (2000) contends that 'the Internet can be seen as textual twice over: as a discursively performed culture and as a cultural artefact' (Hine, 2000: 39). Its status as cultural context is confirmed by the 'rich and complex social interactions' made possible by CMC. At the same time it is also a cultural artefact, since the tool that participants use to access that 'space' is both created and used by humans (Hine, 2000: 27; Ward, 2006: 844).

Summarising the above discussion, the Internet can be used as a communication medium to facilitate academic discourse or as a repository to retrieve information and disseminate research findings. Perceived as a research tool, it may be used by qualitative researchers to recruit or communicate with participants. As an object of qualitative inquiry, the Internet can be conceived of as an umbrella term for spaces of social interactivity. These social spaces afford different kinds of interaction, depending on the underlying infrastructure of the specific technology. Since these technical features not only play a role in shaping communication and interaction, but also serve as some of the criteria to determine the object of the study, a detailed description of these services or applications is relevant.

### **1.3. The Services of the Internet**

Understanding the Internet from its physical properties, it can be described as consisting of a worldwide network of computers that are able to communicate with each other via a set of programmed rules or protocols. A more formal definition that is still being widely used is given by Bell et al (2004):

"The Internet is an international 'network of networks' that uses a common set of standards (TCP/IP) to permit the interconnection of millions of computers, enabling such services as electronic mail and remote access to information." (Bell et al, 2004: 121).

The 'services' that the Internet affords have variously been named software applications or programmes or platforms, places, spaces, venues, modes of

communication, network interaction media, Internet genres, computer-mediated technologies and so forth. This great variety of labels used for the object the study reflects not only the interdisciplinary nature of Internet research, but also portrays the terminology used at the various stages of its development. For the purpose of this discussion that focuses, amongst others, on the infrastructure of the technology, the term 'services' will be applied.

The features of the services that have implications for online communication and interaction fall into three broad categories:

- Synchronicity
- Cues transmitted
- Anonymity and privacy

#### *Synchronicity*

Synchronous communication takes place in real time, here and now. Features of the technology such as the speed of transmission and its global reach create a kind of 'spaceless proximity' (Baym, 2002: 38), making synchronous communication more like conversations in 'real time'. At times this may be a rather chaotic experience similar to a disorderly gathering where everyone 'speaks' at the same time. In contrast, asynchronous communication is 'delayed', meaning that message and response are spread over time. It may be compared to writing a letter, where both sender and receiver need not be present at the same time.

In both cases the pressure to reply immediately is not there, thus allowing the user time to compose and edit the reply before sending it. Responses can be more carefully crafted and reconsidered, which in turn may yield more detailed and rich records, especially in asynchronous communication (Mann & Stewart, 2000: 185). There are also practical advantages for the qualitative researcher who can conduct the study from the comfort of an office and 'complications regarding venues, commuting and scheduling conflicts' are easier to resolve as time and place become less relevant (Markham, 2006: 103).

### *Cues transmitted*

This aspect of the technology refers to the 'amount of cues or social presence conveyed by a technology' (Joinson, 2003: 23) and highlights the differences between text-and audio- or video-based interactions. In text-only online communication a limited number of social cues are available and users have to rely on 'vivid descriptions' in order to create and manage 'presence' and to imagine and interpret the presence of others (Williams, 2007: 11). In addition, the use of paralinguistic cues (emoticons) as substitutes for facial expressions and bodily movements has become a common feature of 'writing talking' in most interactive online environments. The style of the 'language' used will differ across the individual services, depending the purpose and membership of the groups that frequent the service (Mann & Stewart, 2000: 188).

The implications for qualitative research go beyond the mere observation of the technicalities surrounding the 'hybrid language' when the 'oral-written' interaction in text-only environments are considered in terms of its value as data source. Reviewing scholarly opinion and claims regarding this issue, Mann & Stewart (2000) report that '...it does seem possible that CMC will prove a mode that is capable of generating data which are more open, reactive and spontaneous than many traditional written accounts and more detailed, edited and reflective than many spoken conversations'(Mann & Stewart, 2000: 194).

Williams' (2007) account of participant observation in a graphical environment highlights the impact of the visual dimension on computer-mediated environments. Technology here enables a more 'apparent and intact' identity since 'presence' can be visually enacted through the 'corporeal immediacy' of avatars (Williams, 2007: 13). Although interaction is still text-based, participants' accounts show that the additional social cue of 'pseudo-presence' of the self and others leads to a more 'immersed' and 'enriched' communication experience than is possible in text-only environments (Ibid: 9). For the qualitative researcher, visibility adds another complex dimension to the object of the study, the investigation of which poses its own unique set of opportunities and challenges.

### *Anonymity and privacy*

Visual anonymity is closely tied to the lack of social cues as it creates a 'kind of invisibility' in the absence of physical and social markers of gender, race and status. While users are 'visually anonymous' (except perhaps in video-based environments), not all services allow them to be also completely unidentifiable. These services may have built-in mechanisms that restrict access to registered users only. Joinson (2003) maintains, that despite these restrictions, anonymity 'in one form or another, is implicated in most' Internet environments (Joinson, 2003: 24). Opinions diverge as to the effect of anonymity on communicative online behaviour. While some contend that it leads to uninhibited, sometimes aggressive behaviour and identity deception, others associate it with a lower sense of social risk that allows users to be more true to their 'embodied selves' than is possible in the real world (Baym, 2002: 42). Whichever stance is taken, it is clear that this feature of the technology has profound influences on the way users communicate with each other and how researchers come to terms with the authenticity of 'disembodied' participants.

Some services on the Internet, such as the World Wide Web, are considered to be public spaces where published content is open for all to view. Others offer private spaces for more intimate discussions in addition to public spheres, while a number of online environments are strictly private with members-only admission. The degree of privacy afforded influences what users are willing to disclose about themselves; the more private the service is perceived to be, the greater the scope of personal revelations.

The key features of the services that have implications for online communication and interaction that have been discussed revolve around the issues of time-space compression, synchronicity, the cues transmitted and the degree of anonymity and privacy afforded. It is against this background that the different services of the Internet will be described in more detail.

### *E-mail*

E-mail is a text-based asynchronous mode of communication by which one user can communicate with one or more persons at once. It is used for personal, professional or business messages and hence its content will vary from informal/ casual to formal/ composed.

The ongoing popularity of e-mail is partly ascribed to convenience as users can respond to messages in their own time and can compose or edit these responses before sending them. This allows them to 'manage their self-presentation to a greater extent than in face-to-face or telephonic communication' (Herring, 2002: 115).

Busher & James (2006: 415) who used e-mail interviewing in their studies concluded that the asynchronous feature of e-mail combined with response convenience and the capacity to track conversations encouraged reflexive dialogue. However, they also describe this medium as potentially 'oppressive', arguing that it empowers researchers to control the process thereby forcing participants to '...find ways of re-asserting themselves...and in doing so re-negotiating the parameters of engagement' (Busher & James, 2007: 11).

### *Discussion lists*

Referred to also as mailing or distribution lists, members of these online groups share information and offer support or advice about a particular topic of interest. Like e-mail, discussion lists are text-based and asynchronous. Communication takes place via a central e-mail list with contributions posted to the subscribed users. Messages are sometimes organised into 'conversational' threads that are easy to follow. All messages are archived and more often than not publicly available (Herring, 2002). Discussions lists are usually owned by a single individual or a small group who can restrict access to the information about the discussions and the users and have control over group membership. (Stewart & Williams, 2005). These lists are typically moderated, meaning that all messages are screened for approval before they are



distributed. However, most lists operate as 'open spaces' that can be joined by anyone and contributions are generally not moderated (Kollock & Smith, 1999: 5).

Two features that make discussion lists attractive to researchers interested in group communication are the public availability of archived material and the 'open membership policies' (Herring, 2002: 116). This policy of open access has its drawbacks as unrestricted access to the site and its archives invites unrestricted use – a situation that poses ethical challenges for the reflective researcher.

Discussion lists also function as popular tool for conducting online focus groups. No expert knowledge or special software is needed to implement an online focus group discussion (Stewart & Williams, 2005). Besides the advantage that interaction can be controlled, the asynchronous feature of lists allows participants in different time zones to 'exchange messages and sustain discussions' (Kollock & Smith, 1999: 5). Messages can also be composed offline and edited before submission, which makes discussion lists '...particularly valuable when detailed and highly reflective comment is sought' (Mann & Stewart, 2000: 102).

### *Usenet Newsgroups*

Newsgroups function as asynchronous bulletin board systems organised by interest-specific topic that allow users to post e-mail contributions to a public site. However, unlike discussion lists, messages are not distributed but have to be accessed – either in temporal or threaded sequence – via a newsreader client or a Web browser (Herring, 2002). The contributions by members are archived and publically accessible. Newsgroups are usually not owned by anyone and there is no central authority to regulate membership or behaviour, features which make these sites 'more interesting and challenging social spaces' (Kollock & Smith, 1999: 6).

Taking part in newsgroup discussions can indeed be a challenging experience, especially for newcomers, as reduced social accountability may encourage anti-social

behaviour. Discussions can become quite heated and 'flaming' (hostile content) and 'trolling' (provoking hostile responses) are not uncommon in the exchange of messages. (Herring, 2002: 118). Since newsgroups content is open to all and no subscription is required, 'lurking' – being there without being noticed – is frequently practised (Stewart & Williams, 2005). For researchers, 'lurking' presents an ideal opportunity to familiarise themselves with the object of their study or to unobtrusively observe otherwise difficult to reach populations such as hate groups and gays or lesbians.

Due to the fact that newsgroup messages as well as their archived content are publicly accessible via searchable databases, researchers have made extensive use of this readily available data to investigate online group behaviour such as the formation of communities and support groups as well as studying hate speech and language choice (Herring, 2002). However, research ethics relating to the access, use and reporting of newsgroup data are hotly debated amongst academics of the human and social sciences. It is also for these reasons that Stewart & Williams (2005) do not recommend the use of newsgroups for online focus group discussions. The fact that these groups cannot be closed off and identifying information cannot be removed from the source of contribution makes this communication mode less safe for participants and difficult if not impossible to monitor.

#### *Internet Relay Chat Channels*

Internet Relay chat, known for short as IRC, is a synchronous communication mode offered on the Internet by service providers such as American Online (AOL) or as a web-based interface such as the instant messenger ICQ (I seek you). In IRC, multiple users can communicate with each other in real-time by exchanging short text messages which are displayed on the screen for everyone in the 'room' or 'channel' to see. Some chatrooms have moderators who have a considerable amount of control over the conversations that are going on, such as kicking or booting someone out of the room (disconnecting) for inappropriate 'behaviour' (Hudson & Bruckman, 2004).

Users are usually required to represent themselves only by 'user names' or 'nick names'. Most of the interaction is text-based, characterised by the use of an innovative 'written speech' – such as the use of abbreviations and emoticons to express emotions and simulate behaviour – to make up for the missing social cues in online interaction. These features of chat – its heightened sense of immediacy mediated by real-time interaction and the fact that users are virtually anonymous – create an atmosphere where 'playfulness' and creativity is encouraged and where interaction is typically sociable and less inhibited. Thus it is not surprising that 'chatting' is one of the most popular activities on the Internet (Herring, 2002; Stewart & Williams, 2005; Danet, 1997), although its use decreased with the introduction of social network sites.

Because of its popularity and easy access, early researchers from various disciplines have studied online group chat to investigate, for example, its 'play with identity...and typographic symbols' (Danet, 1997: online). Clarke (2000) mentions that IRC channels are a suitable medium for conducting online interviews and focus groups and online observations.

#### *Multi-user Dimensions – MUDs*

MUDs are text-based virtual environments that have their origin in role playing adventure games. Offering synchronous communication together with a textual description of the spatial environment, players can interact in real time with other participants that are logged on by making use of a series of commands to simulate their behaviour (Joinson, 2003; Herring 2002). Similar to IRCs, participants are represented by 'characters' which they describe in great detail and spend much time on developing. MUDs allow users to build spaces that can resemble a room, a house or a landscape and interaction then takes place in these entirely textually created virtual locations. Participation is based on a 'power' hierarchy with more experienced players being afforded the quite powerful and influential status of 'wizards' who control the game (Herring, 2002, Reid, 1995).

Since MUD users are only known by their nick names – the pseudonym for the character they chose to represent – players are relatively anonymous in the virtual MUD environment and tend to be less inhibited. This disinhibition that is observed in most MUDs has a dual effect on its participants as it may encourage the formation of intimate relationships or lead to hostile and violent online behaviour (Reid, 1999).

Although MUDs ‘hardly represent typical online interaction’ (Baym, 2002: 67) in terms of overall Internet usage and access is relatively restricted, it became a very popular research environment. Herring (2002) ascribes this popularity to their ‘exotic’ status which attracted the attention of scholars interested in studying topics such as antisocial behaviours, gender switching, virtual sex and psychological issues such as escapism and MUD addiction. Even though MUDs are interactive, synchronous communication modes, they lend themselves better to online participation observation (Clarke, 2000) than online focus group discussions.

#### *Graphical Virtual Reality Environments*

Building on IRC and MUD protocols, and taking advantage of improved computer technology with expanded hardware, made the development of virtual reality environments possible (Williams, 2007: 9). What sets this mode apart from others is the two or three dimensional virtual environment that is generated on the screen which depicts ‘a physical backdrop or space’ that can be anything from a house to a castle or an outdoor scene (Herring, 2002: 130). This graphical display supposedly “...allows or compels the user(s) to have a feeling of ‘being there’ or being present in an environment other than the one they are actually in—and to interact with that environment” (Schroeder, 2006: 705). Synchronous interaction takes place by way of figures or characters called ‘avatars’ that represent the users. Besides being able to move around, avatars are also supplied with a repertoire of gestures, making interaction more real and also quite complex. Messages are text-based and appear as speech bubbles on the screen (Williams, 2007: 9).

Most studies conducted on graphical virtual reality environments have used (participant) observation to investigate, for example, the sociable nature of online spaces. An example of how synchronous online focus group could be conducted within this communication mode is portrayed by Williams (2007).

### *The World Wide Web*

The World Wide Web (WWW) can be conceived of as a massive network of interlinked 'pages' that provide online information on, amongst others, health services, journals, newspapers, learning materials and courses, virtual libraries and organisations (Clarke, 2000). Personal Web pages document the owner's online presence, displaying personal information such as demographics or professional proficiency and affiliations. Web 'traffic' accounts for much of the data that is transmitted on the Internet. Although the WWW is primarily perceived as a 'content delivery service' accessed by means of the Internet, what is really unique about the Web is its hyperlink structure (Joinson, 2003). Web pages (hypertext documents) that may contain text, images or video can be interconnected with each other through hypertext links, thereby providing a useful selection of resources. Web pages and sites have lately received considerable attention in qualitative research either as a tool to conduct interviews or discussion groups (Maczewski et al, 2004), or as the object of a study that investigates the design of web pages (Hine, 2001).

Herring (2002: 125) considers the WWW to be a 'meta mode' because it 'subsumes and integrates all other CMC modes': it can link to chat, email, discussion lists, newsgroups as well as to web pages. In this sense, the WWW combines all the characteristics of the CMC that it supports with only its hypertextual structure setting it apart. With the introduction of Web 2.0, new services were added to the WWW. These include blogs, wikis, podcasts, RSS feeds, enabling of social network sites, to mention but a few. Although media coverage depicted Web 2.0 as a new version of a more socially connected Web, Anderson (2007) explains that '...(it) should (rather) be seen as a consequence of a more fully implemented Web', that builds on and refines

standards and structures that have been there all along (Anderson, 2007: 6). Thus, for example, Usenet newsgroups or bulletin board systems are the forerunners of present day Web forums. With regard to novel additions to the WWW, online social networks and blogs, which have become popular objects of qualitative research, will be discussed in more detail below.

### *Online Social Networks*

Social network sites enabled through Web 2.0 are the latest appearance of online social networking that experienced an exponential growth since about 2003 (Barsky & Purdon, 2006: 65). Boyd & Ellison's definition of social network sites (2007: online) has been aptly paraphrased by Lange (2007: online):

'Social network sites are defined as websites that allow participants to construct a public or semi-public profile within the system and that formally articulate their relationship to other users in a way that is visible to anyone who can access their profile' (Lange, 2007: online).

These two features of social network sites (SNSs) – communication and networking – are shared by all SNSs with differences noticeable in usage patterns and user purpose (Gross, R. & Acquisti, 2005: 72). For the majority of sites – especially those maintained by teenagers – the main purpose is to communicate and stay in contact with others who already belong to their extended social network. MySpace is probably the most typical and popular example of such a site. Users often take great care in 'crafting' their profile which they can choose to make public or accessible to 'friends' only. The list of 'friends' (connections) displayed on the profile contains links to each Friend's profile. Clicking through this list reveals the social network of connections that chose to be 'friends' (Boyd & Ellison, 2007: online).

Other sites focus more on networking with an emphasis on connecting strangers who share common interests or activities (Ibid: online). LinkedIn, for example, is a professional password-protected SNS that provides 'inside connections' for people

looking for a job or business opportunity as well as offering advice from 'industry experts' (<http://www.linkedin.com/>). Access to profiles is based on paid membership and members can choose whether they want their network displayed or not.

The 'structural variations' around visibility and access of profiles are one of the most obvious ways that distinguish one site from another. Others include technological capabilities offered by a site: photo- or video-sharing capabilities, built-in blogging and instant messaging technology (boyd & Ellison, 2007: online).

As the popularity of SNSs soared, so have the studies that address a range of topics related to online social networking. A review by boyd & Ellison (2007) of previous studies conducted on and through SNSs includes published accounts of impression management and friendship performance, networks and network structures and privacy issues.

### *Blogs*

Blogs are most commonly defined as frequently updated Web pages that contain brief paragraphs of opinions, information or personal diaries in chronological order with the most recent post appearing on top. Most blogs contain hypertext links to other Internet sites which may be references to a source mentioned in a post. Links to useful or favourite blogs are displayed on the 'blogroll'. Besides text-based messages, photos or videos can be incorporated into the blog. Most blogging software allows readers to add comments below a post. However, the blog author can edit or delete these comments and hence still remains in control of the blog content. These posts and comments may be considered as 'conversational exchanges' and support the notion of the blogosphere as a 'socially interactive' space.

Although blogs are commonly perceived to be exclusively in the public domain, access to blog content can be password-restricted. Bloggers can also decide not to have their

blog listed on the blogging service's directory and thus be less traceable. However, unprotected, listed blogs are easily found by search engines and are thus publically accessible (Gurak et al (2004); Anderson (2007); Nosek et al (2004); Herring et al (2004d)).

Blogs vary significantly in nature and content. Herring et al (2005: 4) conducted an analysis of Weblogs and distinguished among three primary types of blogs: personal journal blogs (online diaries); k-logs or 'knowledge logs' (knowledge sharing such as in journals kept by researchers) and 'filters' ('pre-surfing' the Web for the reader to provide commentary and information from other Web sites). Of these, personal journal blogs were by far the most popular type of blog with few if any links to other Web sites and 'filters' the most influential that made extensive use of hyperlinking (Herring et al (2004d); Nardi et al (2004)).

Blogging has become a very popular online activity and the number of bloggers worldwide increased sharply as the blogging software became easier to use (Herring et al, 2004d: 1). Research on blogs includes accounts of the growing influence of blogs in political life (Drezner & Farrell, 2008) and in mainstream media. The ethnographic study of Nardi et al (2004) investigated the blogging activities of individuals and small groups while Mortensen & Walker (2002) used the blog as a research tool to demonstrate 'online presence' to potential informants and as a journal to store their ethnographic field notes.

Although popular reference is made to the 'Internet' in terms of usage, most people only access a limited number of the wide range of Internet services available. The 'early' modes such as e-mail, discussion lists, newsgroups, chat channels and multi-user dimensions (MUDs) are slowly being replaced by the 'newer' modes such as online social networks, blogs and graphical virtual reality environments. As a kind of 'meta mode', the World Wide Web with its hyper-linking structure not only carries



most of the Internet traffic, but also subsumes all other modes which are nowadays accessible through the Web.

The discussion of the objects of qualitative Internet research concludes with tabulation that summarises some of the technological features of these objects.

**Table 1 The technological features of the objects of qualitative Internet Research**

<b>Internet service</b>	<b>Synchronicity</b>	<b>Cues transmitted</b>	<b>Public/private</b>
E-mail	Asynchronous	predominantly text	mainly private
Discussion lists	Asynchronous	text	subscribers only
Usenet Newsgroups	Asynchronous	text	public
Internet Relay Chat	Synchronous	predominantly text	provides both
Multi-user Dimensions (MUDs)	Synchronous	predominantly text	provides both
Graphical Virtual Reality Environment	Synchronous	text/graphics	provides both
World Wide Web	Both	text/graphics/audio/video	mainly public
Online Social Networks	Both	text/graphics/audio/video	provides both
Blogs	Asynchronous	text/graphics/audio/video	mainly public

#### **1.4. Online Qualitative Research Methods**

Commenting on the history of qualitative research, Hamersley (2004) observed the current fragmented situation of qualitative enquiry ‘...with differences not just between, say, ethnography, life history, and discourse analysis, but also among a host of other orientations, as well as between various *kinds* of ethnography, life history, and discourse analysis.’ (Italics in original) (Hammersley, 2004: 25). Adding the Internet as yet another dimension amplifies this diversity of approaches many times over. In view of this multiplicity it is essential to begin with a definition of qualitative research in the ‘traditional, off-line context’ before the discussion then moves to the online context.

#### **1.4.1. Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research is concerned with making meaning of everyday phenomena as they occur within their natural settings. Unpacking this short definition discloses the distinguishing features of a qualitative study that primarily aims at describing and understanding (Verstehen) human behaviour instead of explaining it (Babbie & Mouton, 2001: 270). Rather than studying human experience or relationships in contrived settings, the emphasis is on observing human behaviour wherever, however and whenever it occurs naturally with as little interference or disturbance as possible. Participant observations, conducting individual and group interviews and analysing relevant documents and artefacts related to the setting are methods used by the qualitative researcher to gather 'contextualised' data (Henning, 2004: 49). This 'raw' data is then 'converted to final patterns of meaning' by drawing upon the most appropriate analysis procedure and the 'analytic craftsmanship' of the researcher (Ibid: 119 - 110). As can be related from the above discussion, the researcher adopts a central role in the qualitative research process and is understood to be the 'human instrument' of qualitative research (Mann & Stewart, 2000: 3).

Having briefly described what 'traditional, off-line' qualitative research involves the focus now shifts to qualitative research in the context of the Internet.

#### **1.4.2. Qualitative Research Methods Used in Internet Research**

Qualitative research on the Internet utilises 'traditional' or 'conventional' qualitative research methods that have been adapted to study the object Internet. In view of the multitude of enquiries that are, in one way or another, Internet-based, it is essential to delineate the field that this study focuses on. This is achieved by way of a diagrammatic presentation that depicts the various combinations of 'qualitative method' and 'Object Internet'.

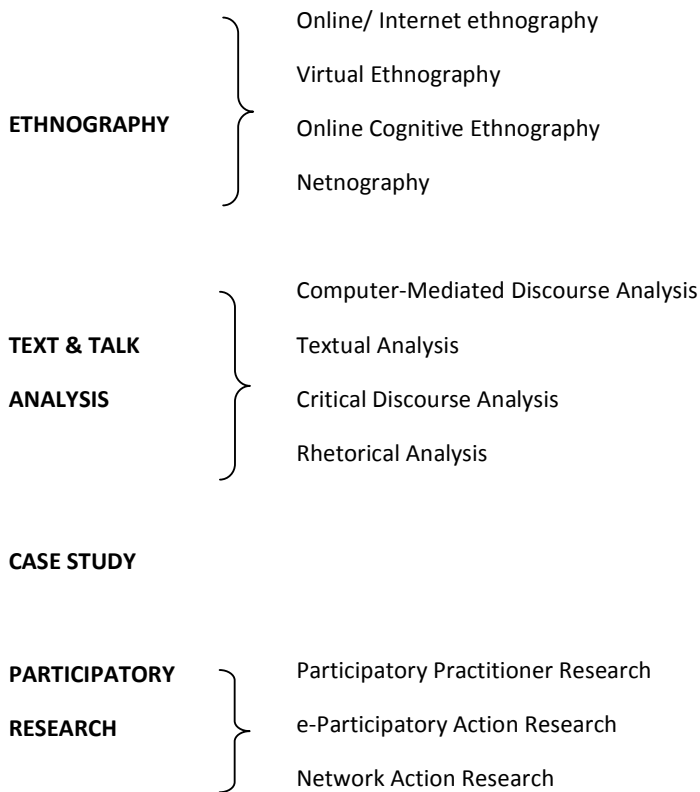
**Diagram 1 Qualitative research method and the Object Internet**

		OBJECT INTERNET	
		YES	NO
QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHOD	YES	<b>Qualitative method used in online environment e.g. virtual ethnography of a chat room; discourse analysis of Usenet communication - INCLUDED</b>	Qualitative method employed in offline environment e.g. 'conventional' ethnography of a youth group; case study of a community - EXCLUDED
	NO	Quantitative method utilised in online environment e.g. surveys using the Internet as data collection tool; quantitative content analysis of social network sites - EXCLUDED	Quantitative method applied to offline environment e.g. household surveys; experimental study of learning behaviour - EXCLUDED

The top left block of the diagram then identifies the type of enquiries that are considered by this study to fall within the domain of qualitative Internet research. Making the Internet the object of these studies leads to the question whether established qualitative research methods can be successfully applied to the new social environment. Although opinions diverge, most scholars concur that despite the novelty of the object, existing methods could be suitably adapted to meet the challenges posed by online research such as 'boundless research populations, anonymous informants and multiple field sites' (Williams, 2007: 8). This uncertainty related to research methods not only stimulated 'methodological debate in general' (Hine, 2005b): 245), but also resulted in a proliferation of methodological approaches and proposals especially in recent years (Domínguez et al, 2007: online). By the turn of the century, monographs that discussed methodological and ethical issues related to Internet research began to appear and most text books on qualitative research nowadays include at least one chapter on online research methods.

The diversity of online qualitative studies encountered during a review reflects the innovative approaches of researchers from a wide range of disciplines. Various approaches to ethnography emerged as the predominant research method used in anthropology, sociology and education while discourse and rhetorical analysis, amongst others, were evidently the preferred method used by linguists and communication scholars. Participatory research and case studies were encountered less frequently. The discussion on qualitative Internet research methods that follows is based on the review of online enquiries and methodological discussions within the qualitative field.

**Diagram 2 Overview of qualitative research methods encountered in online studies**



*Ethnographic Studies*

Ethnographies that identify their object as the Internet are guided by the methodological principles that underpin 'conventional' or 'traditional' ethnography which can be broadly conceptualised as: the prolonged study (observation) of an identifiable group of people in a bounded context (field 'site') '...with the aim of capturing typical activities and tools, ways of communication and meaning making' (Henning, 2004: 42). The written accounts of these observations should render a 'thick description' that captures the meaning people attach to their activities and the context in which such meanings were produced. "Ethnographic methods therefore focus on observing and analysing a variety of 'patterned interactions' and provide an understanding of how and why these are meaningful". (Beaulieu, 2004: 159). Besides gathering material on-site by observing and note-taking (participant observation), other data collection methods that have been used to gather information on the life of the group are various forms of interviewing, conducting focus group discussions with members of the group, studying relevant documents and artefacts. These principal methods of data collection for both off- and online research – participant observation and interviewing – have been discussed in detail elsewhere.<sup>1</sup>

In the early days of Internet research, researchers have had to 'proceed with few practical or theoretical guidelines' (Mann & Stewart, 2000: 5), but as research on the Internet proliferated, so did the literature on online ethnographic experiences as related by those who had employed various 'adaptive' strategies to overcome the barriers that the virtual setting imposed. These reflections were often framed as proposal for innovative methodological approaches. Depending on the discipline and area of interest, these different approaches to the object Internet have become known as Internet ethnography, virtual ethnography, netnography, cognitive ethnography, cyberethnography, network ethnography, digital ethnography and

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<sup>1</sup> See: Dowling, Z.T. (2001). Research, Methodology and the Internet: A study of the Internet as a data capturing tool. Unpublished Masters Thesis, University of Stellenbosch.

connective ethnography. This list is not exhaustive as it represents a selection of the ethnographic studies and methodological texts encountered.

Exploring these online ethnographic encounters leads to the observation that the above are not proposals for a new research method, but should rather be considered as online adaptations of the ethnographic methods as practised within their disciplines and institutions. In other words ‘...the desire to *understand by engaging* stands out as the key motif...as challenges of mediation, of online settings and shifts in distance and time...are all met in the course to establish this engagement’ (Italics in original) (Domínguez et al (2007: online).

Studies that define their research method as ‘Internet ethnography’ or ‘online ethnography’ typically applied the same steps or procedures as followed in offline ethnographic studies to the online environment. Challenges that these researchers experienced as result of the specific characteristics of the online setting necessitated an adaption of these procedures. Discussions on how these methodological and ethical challenges were resolved provide valuable guidelines for others wishing to conduct online ethnographies.

The most influential of the adaptive ethnographic research methods for the social sciences appears to be Christine Hine’s proposed ‘Virtual Ethnography’ (2000). In her seminal work, she proposes that an understanding of the Internet ‘as a discursively performed culture and as a cultural artefact’ (Hine, 2000: 39), makes the Internet amenable to ethnographic investigation. Based on this conceptualisation of the Internet, she puts forward ten principles of ‘Virtual Ethnography’ which developed out of her initial virtual ethnography of a media event, the well-publicised Louise Woodward case (Hine, 2000: 63 – 66). Hine makes it clear that the ten principles are not intended to present a concrete methodological approach, but should be seen as fundamental statements or preconditions for conducting ethnographies in and through the Internet (Bräuchler, 2005: 2). A number of qualitative studies have drawn

upon these principles and her notion of virtual ethnography to frame their ethnographic investigations of the Internet (Ley, 2007; Williams, 2007; Ward, 2006; Vatrapu et al, 2005).

As 'virtual classrooms' are proliferating, a number of educational researchers have applied traditional research methods to study online learning behaviour. An example of an ethnographic approach to investigate cognition and learning in an online environment is Steinkuehler's online cognitive ethnography which involves 'the description of specific cultures in terms of cognitive practices, their basis, and their consequences' (Steinkuehler, 2007a: online). Participant observation, off- and online interviews with key informants and analysis of relevant documents constituted the ethnography, while thematic and discourse analysis were used to explore the data with the view to 'better understand specific socially and materially distributed cognitive practices' (Steinkuehler, 2005a: 20).

In the economic sphere, 'netnography' has made great strides. Developed by Robert Kozinets as an online marketing research method, netnography uses 'the information publicly available in online forums to identify and understand the needs and decision influences of relevant online consumer groups' (Kozinets, 2002: 61). Adapted traditional ethnographic procedures allow the researcher to investigate 'naturally occurring' online consumer behavior in a 'manner that is entirely unobtrusive' (Kozinets, 2002: 62). That these covert observations amount to 'professional "lurking"' and ethically questionable research conduct is acknowledged by Kozinets. It is for this reason that netnography incorporates four 'ethical research procedures', namely, full disclosure of the researcher's presence, affiliations and intentions to potential participants; protection of anonymity and confidentiality of informants; elicit and incorporate feedback from participants, and obtaining permission (informed consent) to directly quote original postings (Kozinets, 2002: 65).

The above discussion touched on four of a broader spectrum of adaptive ethnographies that have been developed by scholars from various academic backgrounds and disciplines. While these will be elaborated on by way of study examples in the next chapter, the following section takes a closer look at qualitative methods that are the realm of linguists and communication scholars.

### *Text and Talk Analysis*

So far the emphasis has been on the Internet as cultural context and site of interaction. However, when interpreting the contributions of Internet users as cultural artefacts that are produced (mainly in textual form) within a cultural context, then Internet can be viewed as ‘a research setting par excellence, practically irresistible in its availability’ (Jones, 1999: 13) for ethnomethodological approaches to social inquiry. Observing ‘natural conversations’ on the Internet these studies seek ‘...to understand cultural meanings and the complexity of daily social experience through the dense reading of (cyber) text discourse’ (Mann & Stewart, 2000: 87). The methods of analysis that have been used by qualitative researchers to make sense of this data include, amongst others, computer-mediated discourse analysis, textual analysis, critical discourse analysis and rhetorical analysis.

According to Herring, discourse analysis as a subtype of content analysis draws on ‘...the theoretical premise that choice of word and expression is potentially significant, beyond the requirements of lexicon and grammar’ and ‘seeks to extract patterned regularities from text’ (Herring, 2004c: 66). Applying this method to the research of online interactive behaviour requires ‘a broader methodological perspective’ to meet the challenges that arise as result of the specific characteristics of the Internet (Herring, 2004b: online). Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA) proposes to resolve these challenges by expanding its ‘methodological toolkit’ to deal with texts ‘in which the unit of analysis are elements of computer-mediated language (letters, words, sentences, messages, turns, exchanges, threads, archives, Web pages, etc.)’ (Herring, 2004c: 66). Describing the ‘basic methodology of CMDA as “language-



focused content analysis””, Herring outlines the five-step process of CMDA that addresses challenges such as selecting a ‘computer-mediated data sample’ and operationalising ‘key concept(s) in terms of discourse features’ (Ibid: online). Following Herring’s recommendation of ‘paradigm-independent best practice’, the implementation of this process will vary as it is adapted to accommodate the specific discourse features of the object and the theoretical interest of the researcher (Herring, 2004b: online). Furthermore, technological advances require the continual adaption of CMDA as online communication becomes increasingly multimodal. Analysis of images (photos, videos, and graphics) necessitates the expansion of the methodological toolkit to incorporate methods of visual analysis (Herring, 2004c: 73). Addressing novel features of the Web, such as hyperlinks, Herring notes that ‘social network analysis can be considered CA (content analysis) in the broadest sense of the term’ in that it identifies linking patterns. Drawing on these methods from other paradigms, allows CMDA ‘to embrace the scope of phenomena included under the new media content’ (Herring 2004b: online).

Furthering the understanding of online texts beyond its content, Mitra & Cohen (1999) propose the use of critical textual analysis whose objective is ‘...to move beyond an analysis of the volume of text and its content to the level of understanding the effectivity of the text and what it says of the community of people who produce and consume the texts’ (Ibid: 181). Besides attending to the formal aspects of the text, the analysis will also be concerned with the way in which texts are connected (intertextuality). The third aspect of the text to be considered is the ‘role of the various readers’ since the text can only obtain its meaning ‘through their reading’ (Ibid: 182). Applying critical textual analysis to online texts requires an adaptation of this method that addresses the specific characteristics of this text. The guidelines offered by the authors as response to this challenge include, amongst others, strategies to select the ‘best starting point of the analysis’ from the vast number of texts available on the Web; the number of texts to consider and how to deal with the ephemeral quality of online texts (Ibid: 192 – 198).

Critical discourse analysis 'might be defined as fundamentally interested in analysing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language' (Wodak, 2004: 187). Now, since the 'Web is one of the key sites' of 'contemporary discursive practice with significant social impact' (Mautner, 2005: 814) it follows that critical discourse analysis is well-suited to interrogate this 'source of data so apposite to CDA's concern' (Ibid: 823). However, the unique features of the Web, such as its intertextuality, its disappearing texts and multimodality, present the analyst with novel challenges. Mautner deals with these and offers general guidelines that address problems related to, inter alia, the criteria used to compile the data to be included in the analysis; sampling issues and the need for analysts to protect 'at least core sections of their corpora against the relentless mutability of web-based data' (Ibid: 822).

'Rhetorical analysis or rhetorical criticism can be understood as an effort to understand how people within specific social situations attempt to influence others through language' (Selzer, 2004: 281). Rhetorical analyses that address the Internet are still rare. An example is Laura Gurak's study of Internet-based protests (2004). Building her analysis around the rhetorical concepts of *ethos* and delivery, she provided a fine example of how online discourse can be analysed from the framework of rhetoric.

Depending on the research question and theoretical interest of the researcher, these research methods used to analyse text and talk produced on the Internet may either solely rely on already existing online discourse or use qualitative data collection methods, such as participant observation, to build the corpus to be analysed. Study examples to be discussed in the next chapter will include both these approaches.

### *Case Study*

The case study method '...investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are

not clearly evident' (Yin, 2003: 13). Applied to qualitative research that investigates the contemporary phenomenon 'Internet', the case study method is regarded as a '...productive and rewarding approach for investigating a wide range of social phenomena within online groups, including issues concerning community, interpersonal relationships, information exchange, and social support'(Kleinman, 2004: 47). The 'deliberate' attention to 'real-life' context is what distinguishes the case study from other methods (Yin, 2003: 13). For online case studies, both the on- and offline environments would constitute the 'real-life context'. Case studies of chat rooms, mailing lists and blogs will be presented in the following chapter.

### *Participatory Research*

The defining attributes of participatory research that distinguish it from 'conventional' social research include 'shared ownership of research projects, community-based analysis of social problems, and an orientation toward community action' Kemmis & Mc Taggart (2005: 560). The different approaches to participatory research that will be illustrated by way of study examples in the next chapter are the following:

- Participatory Practitioners Research: as an example of how qualitative methods may be used by educators to evaluate Internet-based learning environments and improve on online teaching strategies.
- e-Participatory Action Research: as an example of how technology and participatory methods can be combined in a model of e-PAR that harnesses the pervasive influence of technology on everyday lives to initiate and support participatory community action.
- Network Action Research: an innovative approach to action research that considers the influence of network technologies, such as the Internet, on community interactions. Accommodating the changing nature of contemporary communities, network action research is 'a timely and appropriate research methodology to guide studies that involve people, place and technology' (Foth, 2006: 205 – 206).

## **CONCLUSION**

Tracing the history of the Internet shows a technology that developed from a principally resource-sharing technology to one where online social interaction predominates. This 'social' Internet attracted the attention of scholars from various disciplines and subsequently led to a proliferation of studies as diverse as the academic background of its investigators.

The Internet may be considered in different ways: as a tool for scholarly communication or as a research resource to recruit or interact with research subjects; or as a place of social interaction that is amenable to qualitative inquiry. Defining the Internet as an object of qualitative studies leads to the discussion of the different services that are subsumed under the umbrella term 'Internet'. These are described in terms of three technological features that have implications for online communication and interaction.

Moving from the description of the Internet to the research methods used to interrogate this object, a review of qualitative studies on and of the Internet identified the following qualitative research methods: ethnography, textual, discourse and rhetorical analysis, participatory research and the case study method.

Although the Internet offers many advantages – such as ease of access to a diversity of participants and data; cost and time benefits as well as electronic data storage and archiving facilities – researchers grappled with the challenge of adapting traditional research methods to online settings. Most agreed that this had been a valuable opportunity to reflect on methodological issues and rethink methodological principles and strategies. These methodological issues will be touched on briefly.

The hallmarks of the ethnographic method, such as the prolonged participant observation of an identifiable group of people (community) within their natural context (place), are challenged when the ethnography moves from the field to the

Internet as the online setting defies the notions of physicality associated with 'traditional' field work. Considering the absence of a physical location, a lack of face-to-face interaction and presence of both researcher and researched, conventional concepts of 'community' and 'place' which are central to the practice of a 'valid' ethnography, have to be re-conceptualised when applied to the virtual setting.

Disembodiment has also raised questions concerning the authenticity of the data collected from participants whose bodies are '*notably* absent' (Markham, 2005: 808) and who therefore may remain anonymous or '...choose to exploit the virtuality of the medium to experiment with the presentation of the self' (Mann & Stewart, 2000: 208).

The infinite size of the Internet raises concerns regarding the selection of appropriate research sites and the representativeness of the data. With no centralised authority to effectively order its content, identifying sites or sources that are relevant to the research question becomes problematic. Furthermore, samples drawn from the Internet are biased in favour of those who have access, the upshot of which is that certain groups are underrepresented or excluded.

This brief overview of the methodological challenges encountered concludes the discussion of the objects and methods of qualitative Internet research. How these challenges have been met by way of innovative approaches to the object Internet is the topic of the next chapter that presents empirical studies that reflect the diversity of both objects and methods used in qualitative Internet research.

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## CHAPTER 2 QUALITATIVE INTERNET RESEARCH IN PRACTICE: STUDY EXAMPLES

From the abundance of qualitative Internet studies available in publicly disseminated form, seventeen studies have been selected that illustrate the diversity of Internet research as practised within the various disciplines. Several criteria were applied when making the choice which of the initial corpus of about hundred and fifty study examples to consider. The overall concern was to present an overview of qualitative Internet research as it progressed from the early years to research conducted in the new millennium. At the same time, the different research methods and objects of the Internet had to be adequately covered. The sample should also show the diversity of research objectives as formulated within various disciplines. Applying these criteria reduced the corpus to about thirty studies. Of these, those that included methodological discussions and/ or raised concerns about ethical issues were considered for the final sample of representative qualitative Internet studies as presented in Table 2 below.

**Table 2 Study Examples of Qualitative Internet Research**

Research Method	Internet Object	Year of Study	Author(s)	Discipline
Ethnography	MUD	1991 - 1994	Reid, E.M.	Cultural Studies
Discourse analysis	Discussion list	1991 - 1994	Herring, S.	Linguistics
Grounded Theory Study	MOO	1996 - 1998	Roberts, L.	Psychology
Rhetorical Analysis	Newsgroup	1997	Gurak, L. J.	Writing Studies
On-line ethnography	Website	1997 - ongoing	Lysloff, R.	Ethnomusicology
Critical textual analysis	Newsgroup	2001	Richardson, K.	Politics and Communication
Developmental (design) research	WebCT	2004	Blignaut et al	Education Innovation & Education Sciences
Netnography	Web forum	2002 - 2005	De Valck, K. et al	Marketing
Online Cognitive Ethnography	MMOG	2002 - 2005	Steinkuehler, C. A.	Educational Communication and Technology

Besides attending to the research method and the object of the study, the review of these empirical investigations will address the objective(s) of the study; its contribution to the understanding of and knowledge about the Internet as presented in the findings; and methodological and ethical issues encountered in the planning and implementation of the research.

## **2. Study Examples of Qualitative Internet Research**

### **2.1. “Cultural formations in text-based virtual realities”**

#### **An online ethnography by Elizabeth Reid (1991 – 1994)**

Conducted in the early 1990s this study focuses on the cultural and social interaction in text-based MUDs (Multi User Dungeons). Based on the understanding of ‘virtual realities as an imaginative experience and thus a cultural construct rather than a technical construction’, the objective of the thesis was to investigate the new forms of behaviour and cultural formations that have emerged in the virtual world in response to the lack of cultural cues that guide social interaction in the physical world. The aim of the investigation was threefold, namely, ‘(To) examine the impact of MUDs on the practices of interpersonal communication and interaction, and on community formation and social cohesion...and to explore the nature of social identity, sexuality and the body in the virtual environment’ (Reid: online).

The virtual objects investigated were four MUDs that represented the different environments or aspects of the virtual reality that the study aimed to explore. While the social-style MUDs portrayed the changed nature of social interaction, the adventure-style MUD yielded insight into the forms of social control and the exercise of power and the ‘FerryMUCK’, where the player ‘adopts the personae of an anthropomorphised animal’, explored the transformation of the human body and identity in virtual space (Ibid: online). The logged and transcribed sessions on MUDs in

which the author participated, email exchanges with participants and information obtained from newsgroup discussions on MUD-playing constituted the primary sources of data (Ibid: online).

The description of the 'new systems of meaning and social control' in virtual environments that emerged from this enquiry was presented in three chapters, the first two of which were subsequently published in one of the first books on Internet research.

#### *Communication and cultural context*

Since social interaction in MUDs was solely text-based, users had to rely on their creative imaginings and the tools and commands offered by the program to build their virtual world from "textually described 'objects'". Created from nothing but text, these programmed descriptions of places, things and people (players) constituted the context that enabled social interaction within these spaces. To facilitate communication and establish social presence, users did not only rely on existing social interaction commands, such as 'say' and 'whisper', but 'devised systems of symbolism and textual significance which enable them to achieve understanding despite the absence of conventional social context cues' (Ibid: online). The most widely used and expressive of these are emoticons, which were 'pictographs made up of keyboard symbols' that were meant to depict and convey feelings and actions. Since each MUD developed its own unique social context and system of communication that was shared by its members, Reid concluded that '(t)his shared ability allows me to think of the players of a MUD as sharing a common culture, and this common culture allows MUD players to engage in activities that serve to bind them together as a community' (Ibid: online).

Earlier studies concerned with the effect of computer-mediated systems on human behaviour had noticed that users of such systems were inclined to become less inhibited. This observation was all the more applicable to the MUD environment



whose built-in feature of anonymity encouraged disinhibition (Reid, 1995: 173). Players were only known by the pseudonyms they chose for their characters and the description of these made available to others. Coupled with the absence of physical proximity and the slim chance of retribution, players felt safe to display both greater intimacy and hostility toward each other than would have been tolerable in daily life. While the former may have lead to close personal relationships and even 'virtual marriages', the latter could have threatened the integrity and very existence of the MUD. To counter such negative acts, players could resort to technical measures such as 'gagging' whereby messages sent by the offender were not displayed on the screen. If this measure proved ineffective, the 'God' of the MUD used his (or her) power to punish the offending character by either 'toading' (degrading) it with subsequent exposure to public ridicule or by destroying it altogether. While MUDs might have encouraged disinhibited behaviour, order was maintained by means of social and technical measures that 'create the basis for a hierarchy amongst those who play them' (Reid: online).

#### *Power, social structure and social cohesion*

Due to the limited storage capacity of hard disks (at that time) and security risks related to unrestricted access to the program files that define the MUD, granting equal access rights to all users was practically impossible. These pragmatic considerations were the basis for the hierarchical structure of MUDs in which status and power were linked to the ability to manipulate and alter the virtual world. In other words, '(t)he haves are those who can control the form of the virtual world depicted; the have-nots are those that can't. Power on a MUD is quite literally the power to change the world.' (Reid, 1999: 118). Absolute power was realm of the Gods (the MUD administrators) who could change or demolish any object on the MUD system, including the players' character and their creations. Gods might also promote talented and dedicated players to the rank of wizards, a position that was associated with increased access to 'world-manipulating tools'. The hierarchy ranking of ordinary players was controlled by the Gods and wizards who chose to reward those who are

'worthy of them' with privileges that increase the players' access to MUD resources and elevated them to a higher rank. These elaborate power structures were '...maintained through careful attention to the trappings of power, power which, like medieval kingship, owes its legitimacy to the favor of the Gods' (Reid, 1999: 119). However, this power was challenged if the players suspected the Gods or wizards of favoritism when granting promotions or abused their power in other ways and dissatisfied players might migrate to other MUDs. Thus social cohesion in MUDs not only depended on the willingness of players to invest time, talent and emotion to increase the social capital of the MUD, but also on the integrity of the Gods and wizards. Ultimately, MUDs 'should inspire in users a degree of commitment and emotional investment that makes social continuity and stability possible' (Reid, 1999: 130).

#### *Identity and the cyborg body*

'The player is the most problematic of all virtual entities, for his or her manifestation has no constant entity' (Reid: online). Freed from biological and social constraints, players' presentation of their selves in the anonymous virtual world was only limited by their imagination – on the MUD they could be whoever they wish to be. Although there were no set rules that restrained the appearance of their characters, most MUDs required that players set a 'gender-flag' when joining the game. However, gender-crossing was not uncommon on MUDs and was a hotly contested topic amongst players. As result of this 'flexibility of self-presentation', virtual characters were never static, but might 'evolve, mutate, morph, over time and at the whim of their creators' and players might experiment with 'multiple identities' that simulated different persona. In essence, 'MUD characters are much more than a few bytes of computer data – they are cyborgs, a manifestation of the self beyond the realms of the physical, existing in a space where identity is self-defined rather than pre-ordained' (Reid: online).

In a special issue of the journal 'Information Society' (1996), Reid's contribution to the debate of ethical issues in Internet research drew on her experience as researcher of the online communities described above. Reflecting on the problems encountered in 'devising an ethical code to fit the circumstances of the MUD environment' (Reid, 1996: 169), she identified three issues as central to her concern to act responsibly and ethically in a virtually unexplored research environment:

- *Privacy and anonymity.* Since access to the researched MUDs was restricted to registered members only and the conversations taking place in these communities were relatively private, Reid decided that the material gathered by means of participant observations could not be considered to lie within the public domain. Accordingly, permission was asked from members concerned to quote from their conversations (Ibid: 170), assuring them at the same time that all identifying information would be withheld. These requests were met with enthusiasm and some even insisted on having their real names and e-mail addresses included in the citations (Ibid: 171). To accommodate these requests, members were subsequently given the option to remain anonymous.
- *Informed consent.* Obtaining informed consent from each member proved to be practically impossible considering the constant change in member base. Repeated announcements to ensure that new members were informed about the researcher's presence would have disrupted the 'normal social flow'. Deciding that 'some measure of deception, or nondisclosure, was inevitable', Reid used the description of her MUD character to imply her intentions: a 'virtual approximation of a visible tape recorder' and notebook were supposed to signify that she was keeping log files of the MUD sessions (Ibid: 170).
- *Legitimate access:* Contemplating on how to act in the best interest of the MUD community as a whole, Reid decided to ask each MUD administrator for permission to research and report on their MUDs. This decision was based on her assumption that gatekeepers were 'in a position to speak for the MUD community as a whole' (Ibid: 171).

Although initially satisfied that the ethical guidelines developed by her would ensure ethical and responsible research conduct, the negative impact of her research on one MUD compelled her to revisit the assumptions underlying the ethical codes that guided her research. The specific event that ultimately led to this insight concerns a simulated sexual attack by one player on others that occurred on JennyMUSH – a support group for survivors of sexual abuse – which Reid came to know about through the administrator of the MUD who invited her to explore this incidence with the members of the MUD. Some of the data obtained in this way were incorporated into her thesis which she made publicly available on the Internet. The negative effect this public exposure had on the group and its members had not been foreseen by either Reid herself or the administrators of the MUD. Where she had assumed that participants' overwhelming 'willingness to reveal themselves to an unknown audience' (Ibid: 173) were indicative of informed consent, she now realised that the 'disinhibiting effect of computer-mediated communication could conceivably lead people to agreeing to or even insisting on a kind of public exposure by which they may eventually be harmed' (Ibid: 172). By accepting this willingness 'at convenient face value', the researcher was similarly 'disinhibited' in that he or she was inclined to forget that the logged session of the incident involved real persons whose participation in the traumatic incident has had real-life consequences. Based on this insight, she offered the following advice:

'In the particular circumstance of studying on-line interaction, we must take special care to guard against not only any increased tendency to objectify our subjects, but also the tendency for our subjects to underestimate the potential consequences of consent. The criteria for informed consent that may be sufficient in face-to-face research environments are not necessarily enough in a medium in which subjective experience is easily objectified and information is easily devalued.' (Ibid: 173).

At the centre of this message was Reid's appeal to social researchers of online communities to consider the special circumstances involved in online research in

order to 'minimize the potential harm that may come to the human subjects involved' (Ibid: 174).

Reid's cultural study of MUDs was one of the first to provide a detailed description and analysis of the culture in virtual environments. Deciding that participant observation would be the most appropriate method to collect the rich, contextual data needed to inform the enquiry, her main methodological and related ethical concerns were: how to gain entry to a 'virtual field', how to manage her own 'disembodied' presence in the field and what obligations she would have towards the MUD communities under study. As discussed above, the ethical consequences of each of these method decisions was carefully considered. Her role as researcher in the online environment might then be described as 'observing participant', since neither was she a 'lurker' collecting data unobtrusively, yet her intention to make her presence known to all participants was challenged by the particular circumstances of the field she chose to investigate. Furthermore, although MUDs do have a strict hierarchy where the 'Gods' and wizards assume the role of gatekeepers, this was not to say that they could always act in the best interest of the group. Despite these challenges, her two-year immersion into the virtual world of various MUDs has produced an insightful account of the social and cultural practices and the issues of hierarchy and power of online communities. Today it is valued as a historic account of the way in which the imaginations and skills of a group of people turned a simple computer program, a keyboard and a screen into a virtual community.

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## **2.2. “Posting in a different voice: Gender and ethics in computer-mediated communication”**

### **A computer-mediated discourse analysis by Susan Herring (1991 – 1994)**

In the early 1990s, the view of the new communication technology as a leveller of social relations was widely held. The claim that computer networks would erase social differences was based on the notion that online interaction was both ‘decontextualised and potentially anonymous, free from physical cues’ such as gender, race and so forth (Herring, 1996c: 116). As a result of this belief in the new technology as social equaliser, gender neutrality in computer-mediated communication (CMC) was initially taken for granted rather than questioned (Ibid: 116). Moreover, claims of gender differences were ‘considered politically incorrect’ by feminists at that time, for fear that these would perpetuate ‘traditional stereotypes’ and support conventional thinking that ‘gender inequality...is part of a pre-ordained social order and should not be changed’(Ibid: 117). As a result of these two popular beliefs, gender issues did not feature in CMC research at that time.

Another research area that was neglected concerned ethical issues related to CMC. While the inappropriate use of the technology, such as copyright violations, was widely discussed, little attention was given to the ethics of CMC interaction itself, ‘by which I mean the conflicts of interest and potential harm to others which can result from the manner and the extent to which computer-mediated messages are posted in

public places' (Ibid: 115). Besides, rules guiding appropriate posting behaviour (netiquette) were not neutral but reflected value systems and judgements that typically endorsed the most powerful members' values (Ibid: 115). It is against this background of 'gender, ethics and etiquette on the Internet' that the author framed her argument of the study:

'I claim that women and men appeal to different – and partially incompatible – systems of values as the rational foundation of their posting behaviour and in interpreting and evaluating the behavior of others online. The values correspond to differences in posting style, and are evident as well in official netiquette guidelines, where the general bias in favor of values preferred by men has practical consequences for how comfortable women feel in mainstream electronic forums' (Ibid: 115).

Data collection took place over a span of three years (1991 to 1994) and initially targeted only one listserv (email-based discussion list), the LINGUIST-L, an academic forum for professional linguists, which the author had joined. The observation that only a few contributions were made by female members while 'men were airing their opinions and got all the attention' (Herring, 1996a: 1070) aroused her interest in gender issues that subsequently inspired a series of investigations concerning various gender-related topics within different discussion forums (Herring, 1992; Herring, 1994; Herring et al, 1995; Herring, 1996b). The empirical evidence on which the current essay is based consisted of three parts:

- *Behavior*: Ethnographic observations were conducted, (as synonym for 'lurking' (Herring, 1996a: 1070)) 'ranging from periods of two weeks to three years of daily exchanges in nine computer-mediated discussion lists with varying concentrations of female subscribers (from 11% to 88%)' (Herring, 1996c: 117). Selected discussions from list contributions were analysed using '*discourse analysis* in which patterns of grammatical and stylistic usage were identified' (Herring 1996b: 479; Italics in original). Observed amount and style of

participation were subsequently correlated with the sex of the participants (Ibid: 479).

- *Values*: An anonymous survey, which was posted to eight groups asked for demographic particulars of the respondents in addition to three open-ended questions 'about what Net users most appreciate, dislike and would like to change about the behaviour of others online' (Herring, 1996c: 117).
- *Netiquette guidelines*: Defined as 'publicly available statements of recommended posting and Net use practices', these welcome messages of seven discussion lists and two general collections of 'recommended network etiquette' (Ibid: 117,132) were subjected to content analysis and the results compared with the 'behaviours' and 'values' findings.

The consistent gender behaviour and value patterns that emerged from all three analyses supported the author's proposition, namely, that 'contrary to the assumptions that CMC neutralizes gender, there are gender differences in public discourse on the Internet' (Ibid: 137):

- *Different posting styles*: Two distinct types, or extremes, of posting styles were identified: those characterised by a 'challenging, adversarial, or superior stance vis à vis the intended addressee(s)' and those that conveyed 'support and appreciation, and in which views are presented in a hedged fashion, often with appeals for ratification from the group'. While the former was primarily used by male participants, the latter was almost always associated with female participants. Even though the majority of postings exhibited a combination of the two styles or none at all, two distinct groups emerged: men using extreme forms of 'adversariality' (flaming) and women displaying extreme forms of 'appreciation and support'. It is in these extremes that the gendered style manifested itself most clearly and in so doing 'put(s) to rest the myth that gender is invisible on computer networks' (Ibid: 118 – 121).
- *Different values*: Three distinctive themes transpired from the analysis of the three open-ended questions of male respondents: '*freedom from censorship*,



*candor and debate*' (Ibid: 126; Italics in original). These recurring themes – which were practically missing from female answers – “...make up a coherent and rationally motivated system of values...the ‘anarchic/ agonistic ethic’” that emphasised freedom of expression, individual autonomy, honest opinions and ‘vigorous exchange of conflicting views’. Female responses related to themes of acceptance (being liked) and support. The author labelled this set of values, which was primarily adhered to by female participants, ‘the positive politeness ethic’ that ‘involves supporting, helping and generally being considerate of others’ (Ibid: 122 – 131).

- *Netiquette guidelines*: Each ‘normative statement’ of the guidelines was coded for ‘politeness’, which was conceptualised “as behaviour that addresses two kinds of ‘face’: positive face, or a person’s desire to be ratified and liked, and negative face, or the desire not to be constrained or imposed on” (Brown and Levinson, 1987; paraphrased in Herring 1996c: 124). The content analysis results exposed a definite gender bias in netiquette guidelines: all but the few women-centred discussion lists scored high on negative politeness which is associated with the male ‘anarchic/ agonistic’ set of values. This finding suggested that interaction on the Net is largely defined by ‘masculine norms’, the practical implication of which was that women, who value positive politeness, felt uncomfortable ‘in mainstream electronic forums’ (Ibid: 132-136).

The gender differences observed in the public discourse of discussion have ‘implications for the norms, demographics, and distribution of power on the Internet’. The conflicting value systems that transpired ‘...can be seen to reproduce male dominance and female (or less powerful individuals’) submission. They provide a mechanism by which these behaviours can be understood in a favorable, face-saving light by those who engage in them, and thereby facilitate their unquestioned continuation’ (Ibid: 137). It is thus important that these patterns of interaction which

marginalise women's participation on the Net, be questioned, recognised and acted upon.

The author's early interest in researching computer-mediated communication (CMC) soon led to the realisation that contemporary discourse analysis literature offered no methodological guidance with regard to the analysis of CMC. In an effort to deal with this shortcoming, she developed an adaptive form of discourse analysis based on her experience with the analysis of communication on electronic discussion boards (as discussed above). The ensuing paradigm, computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA) has been discussed in more detail in the previous chapter (Herring, 2004c: 65).

Similar to the methodological quandaries described above, no guidelines that spelled out the ethical responsibilities of CMC researchers existed in the early days. For linguistic researchers who traditionally analysed printed texts that are in the public domain, the fuzzy boundary between public and private spaces in the virtual environment presented itself as a main ethical concern. For example, are the discussions taking place in online forums to be treated as '(p)ublic interaction (that) is repeatable for any reasonable and nonmalicious purpose (with citations of the source where credit for ideas is due)' or as '...private interaction (that) should not be repeated outside the group without explicit permission of the source involved?' (Herring, 1996d: 166). Herring's position on this issue was very clear: if the listserv group identified itself as private and provides the technological mechanism to restrict access to members only, then it was the ethical responsibility of the researcher to protect the privacy of such group and its individual members by firstly approaching the list owner or moderator for permission to conduct research on the group and secondly, by obtaining informed consent from individual members. Open-access groups that did not restrict membership and that anyone owning a computer and the necessary software was welcome to join were thus 'by default' public (Ibid: 165). This proposal was based on two assumptions: that this distinction between public and

private spaces or groups 'becomes sufficiently conventionalised', meaning that everyone using the Internet was aware of and followed these rules. Secondly, regarding private groups, the underlying assumption was that 'participants and listowners have a responsibility to themselves to protect their privacy' (Ibid: 166).

In her study described above, informed consent was not sought from individual participants nor were listowners or moderators approached for permission to observe and analyse the discussions. Two reasons were cited for this omission. Firstly, the author considered the contributions to be public discourse since all the listserv groups researched were open groups that could be joined by anyone and the topics discussed were largely academic and impersonal. Secondly, she 'suspected' that not all members would agree to participate and 'I did not want to be constrained to write only what (the more vocal, dominant) members of the group would approve' (Ibid: 163).

Another equally contested ethical issue concerned the requirement to provide anonymity to participants. This ethical obligation was endorsed by most, but not all, academic disciplines. According to Herring, these different approaches arose from the 'contradictory assumptions about the nature of CMC' and 'about what constitutes research' (Ibid: 165): electronic texts might either be compared to 'spoken conversations' or be regarded as similar to 'written material' (Ibid: 158). If the former was assumed, the focus of research was on the content of the conversations and direct quotations of electronic contributions would be ethically justifiable provided that the identity of the contributors and the name of the computer-mediated group were not revealed. These measures would have made it very difficult for anyone to trace the source of the texts and would thus have preserved the anonymity of both the participants and the context of the interactions (Ibid: 158). On the other hand, researchers, whose interest was in the form and structure of published accounts, treated electronic texts like 'written material'. Viewed from this perspective, the contributions of participants would have fallen under the copyright law and examples of such texts would have to be accompanied by full citations, and be subject to the

'fair use requirement'. In other words, citing from such texts would have been ethically acceptable on two conditions: that the researcher had legitimate access to the source and that the citations were fully acknowledged (Ibid: 158).

The approach followed by Herring in her own studies mirrored both these analogies. In the study described above, contributions or messages of participants were quoted anonymously; a citation practice which is in accordance with that for spoken language research. Commenting on why she chose this mode of representation, she mentioned both scholarly reasons – 'individual variation is not the focus of my research'- and ethical reasons – 'I wish to reserve the right to critique the discourse that I analyse...and in order to do so without damaging the reputation of the individuals who happen to provide me with the data, I anonymize them' (Ibid: 158).

Then again, the identity of the (open-access) discussion lists was revealed – the name of the listserv preceded the members' direct quotes from messages; a referencing practice more closely associated with that of written language research. The decision to disclose the discussion groups' name was based on the author's reflection that '...it strengthens the quality of the scholarship (and) allows the empirical claims of the work to be independently assessed' (Ibid: 159). Herring's seemingly inconsistent approach to the question of representation might then be interpreted as an effort to conduct ethical and critical research while at the same time advancing rigorous research practice.

This analysis of computer-mediated communication discourse in various discussion boards was one of the first studies to expose the gender bias that to some extent does still exist in online communication to this day. Herring's critical approach to matters of social importance was well served by a research method such as CMDA that 'could be fruitfully applied to analyzing...the discursive constructions of power' (Ibid: 162) in cyberspace. The overall finding of the qualitative enquiry, namely, that women's participation in online discussions is constrained by male dominance, were made

publicly available on the Internet to others beyond the academic community, thus encouraging women to be more assertive in online interactions. The author described this social consequence of her study as a further commitment to the ethical concerns of social science research 'not just to avoid harm, but also do good, for the researched population and society as a whole' (Ibid: 164).

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### **2.3. “Social interaction in virtual environments”**

#### **A Grounded Theory Study by Lynn D. Roberts (1996 – 1998)**

The study incorporated three separate empirical investigations that together examined ‘...how characteristics of the individual interact with characteristics of computer-mediated communication (CMC) to enable socio-emotional communication and behavior in text-based virtual environments’ (Roberts, 2001: 67). The enquiry discussed here was the ‘first step’ towards this aim, namely, its objective was to explore the social interactions in a MOO (Multi-User Dimensions, Object-Orientated).

Placing this research on MOOs within the context of the researcher’s discipline (psychology) and qualitative Internet research conducted at that time (the early phase), its concern with social and emotional communication and behaviour in online spaces must be understood against the background of competing media theories as applied to CMC research in the 1990s. Findings from (mostly experimental) studies supported the ‘reduced social cues’ perspective, whilst research adopting a qualitative

approach portrayed CMC as essentially social, capable of sustaining meaningful social relationships. In view of this controversy and in the absence of established Internet research methods to guide researchers, Roberts decided upon an exploratory investigation based on the Grounded Theory method (Ibid: Chapter 2).

Data collection took place 'within' the object of the study, meaning that online semi-structured interviews with 54 'MOOers' in eight MOOs were conducted in a specially constructed "Questioner's Retreat" with the character 'Questioner' representing the author. In addition, data was gathered by means of participant observation and the collection of postings to MOO mailing lists and documentation to strengthen the reliability and validity of the exploratory study (Ibid: 85). Based on the constant comparison method of Grounded Theory analysis, the texts were coded and categorised using the qualitative analysis software QSR\*NUDIST as a tool. Related codes were grouped into broader, more abstract categories (Ibid: 94).

The outcome of the study was presented as a 'substantive Grounded Theory of social interaction in MOOs' (Ibid: 160). A stage model for social interaction in MOOs was developed that describes '...the changes in thinking over time from MOOs as a separate or alternative reality to everyday life, to an acceptance of MOOing as part of everyday life' (Ibid: 260). Broadly described, the stages identified by Roberts include:

- Initiation into the virtual reality environment which typically involves a process of learning the necessary skills to participate and superficial contact with many users in the public areas of the MOO describes the first stages.
- Once established, the formation of closer ties, that are characterised by 'high levels of self-disclosure and intimacy', with a limited number of special friends and a preference of moving the conversations to the private arenas of the MOO marks the period where '...the individual develops a sense of belonging and a sense of community and an intense involvement and interest in on-line life' (Ibid: 231). This intense involvement with the virtual environment may be followed by a period of disillusionment when the 'initial enchantment' has

worn off. Several cycles of enchantment/ disillusionment may be experienced 'until a state of equilibrium is reached'. However, for some individuals, the prolonged immersion in on-line life may lead to (self-reported) addiction – 'a compulsion...to be logged on continuously' (Ibid: 104).

- The final stage 'reflects the integration of on-line and off-line life and identities' where relationships formed on-line may be continued off-line and the boundaries between 'virtual' and 'real' fade away as the main motivation for using the MOO now is to connect with others in off-line life (Ibid: 232).

The stage model as presented by Roberts challenged the contemporary 'reduced-social-cues' view of the virtual environment as 'lean medium'. The findings from her research indicated the opposite, namely that MOOs were '...inherently social communication environments that support relational communication' (Ibid: 235). Furthermore, the perceived anonymity of the environment through the use of characters '...enables users to interact freely without fear of off-line consequences', thus making the MOO a 'safe environment for social interaction' (Ibid: 316).

Referring to the challenges of conducting qualitative Internet research, the author addressed four 'new ethical issues inherent to the medium', namely, assumptions of privacy, protection of pseudonyms, processes for obtaining consent, and the security of data' (Ibid: 72). The discussion that follows illustrates the way in which these issues were addressed in the study described above. (The source used for this discussion is a book chapter that was co-authored by her thesis supervisors).

- *Assumption of privacy (public versus private space)*. The blurred distinction between private and public spaces in online environments was a major issue that confronted Internet researchers. The decision whether the online environment to be investigated constituted a public or a private space was essentially an ethical one as it influenced the right of the participants to informed consent. Although no clear guidelines as to the nature of online environments had been forthcoming at the time Roberts conducted her study,



unlike her predecessors, she could turn to the published accounts of the early Internet researchers for guidance. Accordingly, for the purposes of her study, she relied on Allen's (1996) distinction of private and public spaces on MOOs. Considered public were the public rooms on the MOO that were accessible to all its members, while private spaces denoted the private rooms that were user-created and controlled. In addition, the recognition that private interaction could also take place within the public spaces was adopted from Waskul & Douglass (1996) (Roberts et al, 2004: 161 – 162).

- *Informed consent.* The decision to obtain informed consent from participants that were interviewed was based on the ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association (APA). However, the implementation of such procedure proved to be 'contentious'. Drawing on Jacobsen (1999), she identified 'three methods of informed consent for online research where the completion of documentation offline is not possible' (Ibid: 162): digitalized signatures, implied consent after having read information posted about the research and logging consent obtained via an online form. For the purposes of her research, the third option was adopted as the most feasible one. As a first step, permission was requested from the wizards of each MOO to contact and conduct interviews with interested users. Information about the research was sent to these participants via MOO-mail and informed consent obtained 'in text' through the same channel (Ibid: 163).

A further 'contentious' issue was the question whether informed consent was required for data obtained through participant observation. The decision taken was guided by Reid's (1996) advice which urged researchers to ensure that participants are fully informed about the possible consequences of their participation in the research in order to minimise the potential for harm to participants in online environments. A further consideration was the 'Notice for Journalists and Researchers' posted on some MOOs that required them to 'ask for permission from all direct participants before quoting any material

collected here' (Ibid: 164). Based on these reflections, Roberts asked for permission to cite the postings except where individuals insisted that their contribution be identified, an approach that she identified as "based on respect for individual's right to say how their 'work' is used" (Ibid: 164).

- *Identification of researcher in virtual communities.* Roberts described her role on the MOOs as 'participant as observer'. Taking on the pseudonym of 'Questioner' she clearly identified herself as researcher to other MOO users. However, prior to the survey she had been a regular member on some of the MOOs for a considerable time. This obviously created a situation of conflicting agendas that could result 'in research that lacks objectivity, is subjective, and influenced by personal feelings' (Ibid: 165). The resolution of this conflict was quite resourceful: to separate the two identities, her researcher identity (the 'Questioner') was created as 'morph' on her social character, thereby overtly linking the two identities, while at the same time separating them for the identified purpose: to socialise or to conduct interviews. In that way, neither the overt presence of the researcher nor the objectivity of the research was compromised (Ibid: 165).
- *Protecting anonymity.* To ensure that participants remained anonymous, no 'real' names were asked nor recorded and no 'MOO names' were used in the report, unless specifically requested by the participant. Neither was the name of the MOO revealed. This approach afforded 'the greatest protection to the identity of research participants', thus ensuring that 'the anonymity and confidentiality of research participants was maintained' (Ibid: 166).
- *Ownership of words.* According to Roberts, this issue was far from being resolved as it was not yet clear whether the electronic message belonged to the author, the group or the receiver of such message. To complicate matters further, the messages might 'be considered original works protected by copyright' and in the absence of (the ethical obligation) of informed consent, legal requirement was that it be referenced in the same way as offline documents (Ibid: 166). Following Sixsmith and Murray's (2001) suggestion, and

as discussed before, permission was sought to use the postings anonymously. However, some participants preferred to be named and '(w)e respected the right of the individuals to make this choice and complied with their wishes' (Ibid: 167).

- *Maintaining the security of the data collected.* In online environments, where 'confidentiality relies upon data security', the unique features of the data posed additional challenges, some of which were difficult, if not impossible to meet. Threats to data security included interception by wizards who have access to the data stored on the MOO; the use of surveillance tools on MOOs by others; data might be intercepted during transmission by service providers or employers, and hackers might gain illegal access to the data stored 'on poorly protected computer systems' (Ibid: 168). To prevent these multiple risks to 'breach of confidentiality', Roberts employed several strategies such as using MOO commands that allowed for the 'sweeping' the interview room for 'bugs' (surveillance tools) before each interview and the 'locking' the room for the duration of the interview (Ibid: 169) to minimise the risk of uninvited intrusions and 'listening in' of wizards during data collection.

In conclusion, Roberts emphasised the need for researchers to take care of ethical issues before research started while at the same time remaining open to new ethical issues that might arise during the research process and that would necessitate the adoption of additional measures (Ibid: 170).

Bearing in mind that the aim of this particular investigation was the exploration of social interaction in MOOs with the view to formulate testable hypotheses, the Grounded Theory approach presented itself as the most appropriate research method to use. Applying this method in the online environment necessitated the adaption of participant observation and interviewing that constituted the primary data collection tools. Since the author had decided to conduct the interviews *within* the environment, a number of issues had to be considered. Amongst these was the primary question of

obtaining informed consent from the participants in text-based environments. Regarding her role as 'complete' participant observer, the challenge of overt researcher presence in a virtual setting needed to be negotiated. Furthermore, the undetermined ownership status of electronic messages created the problem of adequate and ethical representation of the owner's words when used as quotations in the research report. As the written account of her participation in the social world of MOOs testified to, the methodological and ethical hurdles that qualitative online research raised were amicably resolved. These difficulties echo those that Reid experienced when conducting her cultural study on various MOOs. In contrast to Roberts, Reid's carefully designed study was instrumental in bringing about an ethical dilemma.

The 'stage model of social interaction' that was based on the results of the study did not only enrich psychological theory, but also had practical implications. As Roberts pointed out, these innovative normative models of the Internet could be used by psychologists as a yardstick against which to assess the on-line behaviour of patients with Internet-related problems (Roberts, 2001: 317).

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**2.4. “The promise and the peril of social action in cyberspace: *Ethos*, delivery and the protests over MarketPlace and the Clipper chip”**

**A rhetorical analysis by Laura J. Gurak (1997)**

The promise of the new technology as a space that allows for greater participation in public discussions has led to the perception of the Internet as a democratising space where ordinary citizens were not only able to voice their opinions, but that also allowed them to take collaborative action. Investigating this potential of cyberspace as arena for political and social action, the author presented two case studies of online protests – the ‘MarketPlace’ and the ‘Clipper chip’ – which demonstrated how the unique features of this new technology enabled ordinary citizens to take social action (Gurak, 1999: 245). Discussing these online protests from the framework of rhetoric, the author formulated the objectives of her analysis as follows:

‘I argue that two rhetorical features, powerful and quick delivery on computer networks and a strong community *ethos*, were critical to both social actions because these features sustain such actions in the absence of traditional face-to-face methods of establishing presence and delivering message. I argue that what we see in both of these cases is the true proverbial double-edged sword. On the one hand, these cases illustrate the promise of online communication...(y)et at the same time the MarketPlace and Clipper cases illustrate a certain peril...’ (Ibid: 244).

The controversy that evolved around the product MarketPlace is reviewed in more detail.

In 1990, the Lotus Development Company announced the release of a marketing database for small businesses – called ‘MarketPlace: Households’ – that would increase their competitiveness by giving them access to the names, addresses and spending habits of millions of American households. The announcement of this commercial product was, however, not well received by the American public who denounced it as an invasion of their privacy, maintaining that Lotus ‘MarketPlace’

compromised their right to privacy protection. Privacy advocates initiated the online protest by spreading the message via the Internet primarily through notices sent as email messages that were redistributed and through letters to newsgroups that were reposted to others. Once on the Net, the protest sparked emotive online debates about the privacy implications of the product and instigated social action as participants were encouraged to contact Lotus and have their names removed from the notorious database. In the end, the product was never released, partly as result of the successful online protest (Ibid: 243 – 244).

The texts that were analysed include information downloaded from the Internet in the form of postings to Usenet newsgroups and discussion lists, email exchanges and messages to members of Congress and other officials. The information obtained this way was triangulated with the findings of online participant observations and the results of interviews conducted with organisers and participants of online forums. In the subsequent analysis these texts were examined for, amongst others, their rhetorical features of *ethos* and delivery (Ibid: 245).

*Ethos* as used in classical rhetoric 'is associated with the credibility or character of the speaker', while delivery traditionally referred to the "physical actions and 'body language' involved in giving a speech" (Ibid: 246, 248). Applied to the online environment these long-established rhetorical concepts and their relationship acquire a new meaning: delivery is now 'bound up in the medium of distribution', the Internet, which enables the speedy and simultaneous delivery of messages regardless of distance and time. Extending *ethos* of the individual to 'the group persona created by communication technology', leads to an understanding of group *ethos* as 'a complex set of characteristics constructed by a group, sanctioned by that group, and more readily recognizable to others who belong or share similar values or experiences' (Ibid: 247).

*The promise of delivery and ethos in cyberspace*

In the case of the Lotus online protest, the combination of fast and widespread electronic delivery and a strong community *ethos* helped to bring the protest into focus quickly and effectively. The speed and reach of delivery brought the issue of the 'MarketPlace' to the attention of online communities with a common concern about computer privacy who continued to spread the message on the Internet. These electronic texts 'serve(d) to create and maintain...a group *ethos* of sarcasm, blame, and anger, and concern for personal privacy, which arose out of and reflected the character and values of the individual speakers and the community' (Ibid: 247). It is thus this common *ethos* which mobilized people into action once the shared concern was articulated and had become the focus of the debates surrounding the protest. Online social action was instigated by certain prominent postings that encouraged participants to email or write to the CEO of Lotus and have their names removed from the database (Ibid: 253). One of these postings, the 'Seiler letter', was posted and reposted over and over again until eventually it was selected as *the* representative message because it '...appealed strongly to a collective *ethos* of anger and concern over MarketPlace' (Ibid: 254). Driven by this shared *ethos* of the participants and enabled by the efficient delivery of cyberspace, the online social action proved to be successful in stopping the release of the MarketPlace.

*The peril of delivery and ethos in cyberspace*

The same features that 'suggest great promise for online social action' might, however, also lead to the spread of inaccurate information. The content of postings from reputedly trusted and credible participants was rarely challenged, particularly at times of online protest when prominent postings with a strong appeal to shared concerns might fuel an already existing 'emotive community *ethos*'. Although the 'Seiler letter' and a subsequent anonymous posting contained exaggerated and inaccurate information, they spread quickly and widely without much critical assessment or verification of sources, because 'the appeal of *ethos*...was more powerful to online participants than was the desire for accurate information' (Ibid:

256). The 'rhetorical dynamics' that sustain online protest might thus simultaneously promote the spread of inaccurate information. In addition, the highly specialised nature of newsgroups might result in a narrow-mindedness that excludes those whose views differ from the assumed shared attitudes. Postings that appealed to this shared *ethos* were regarded as important and credible, while critical voices that questioned the truthfulness and reliability of such messages were ignored (Ibid: 259).

The new technology thus seemed to offer the potential as space where ordinary citizens could make their voices heard in greater numbers than ever before. In addition, the current structure of the Internet undermined existing (real-world) hierarchies, making it possible for people to communicate on equal level, regardless of status and position. This promise of the Internet as democratising space was, however, not without its problems as it might also at the same time further insularity and inaccurate information (Ibid: 259). To 'inspire more of the promise and less of the peril' Gurak suggested that academics work in close cooperation with other stakeholders, such as designers and government bodies, to 'bring this needed perspective into the policies of cyberspace' (Ibid: 260).

Reflecting on the ethics of using and quoting from the texts gathered from publicly accessible electronic forums, Gurak noted that she considered these to be in the public domain. Approaching such material from a critical perspective supported her contention that the use of postings 'would no doubt fall under the fair use provisions for copyright' (Ibid: 246) which meant that these texts could be directly quoted without obtaining the permission of the author concerned, provided that such quotes are fully cited. However, she decided to replace the real names of the authors with pseudonyms in cases where she had not obtained permission, explaining her reason for doing so as follows: 'I have cited Internet postings with accuracy and with respect for privacy balanced by a belief that material posted to publicly accessible Internet forums can and should be used by scholars and researchers' (Ibid: 246).



A later article, which discussed the adaptation of traditional approaches to research in cyberspace and that she co-authored (Gurak & Silker, 1997), addressed, amongst others, the nature of documents used in rhetorical analysis. Where traditionally documents could easily be identified as published, unpublished or as 'transcripts of oral conversations', applying these features to Internet material might be 'confusing'. In view of the fact that these distinctions and the legal requirements of fair use determined whether or not the study of the document required the permission of the author(s) involved, the ambiguous nature of electronic texts raised both ethical and legal concerns (Ibid: 409 - 410). The researcher who intended to apply rhetorical analysis to such texts thus had to make the critical decision whether to treat the corpus as public texts or written conversations. Each choice involved a series of different steps and resolutions:

- Texts treated as published material: raised the question whether permission must be obtained to study these texts. Based on claims made in other studies (Gurak, 1997, Herring, 1996) the ethical requirement of consent does not apply as the use of such material is guided by the 'legal doctrine of copyright and fair use'. Copyright law states that 'whenever the expression of an idea becomes fixed in a tangible medium, that expression is protected' and such expressions may not be reproduced without the permission of the author. Following Cavazos and Gavino (1994) who maintained that "'the existing copyright system seemed to hold up rather well' in cyberspace' (quoted in Gurak and Silker, 1997: 110), having made copies or downloading material from the Internet would violate copyright law. However, the 'fair use' clause addresses conditions under which such material might be used without permission. The criteria for establishing fair use include:
  - whether such use is educational
  - whether the original material is published or unpublished
  - the amount of material used (as fair use does not always apply when entire texts are used)
  - the impact on the original (Ibid: 110).

If the researcher chose to rely on the clause of fair use, he or she might decide that the use was educational (research), that the original was published (as claimed by other CMC researchers) and that the researcher's use has had no damaging effect on the original. However, determining the amount of material used begs the question: 'what constitutes an entire text' as applied to, for example, newsgroup postings that include both header and signature files? A similar controversy ensues if the researcher assumed that the material to be used, such as chat conversation, was copyrighted, but found 'it difficult, if not impossible, to trace accurately the origins of these messages and confirm their actual authorship, because people on the Internet often use pseudonyms' (Ibid: 411).

- Texts treated as written conversations: implied that the study to be conducted involves human subjects and that these written conversations more often than not have taken place within an online context that is perceived as private by its users. Hence the researchers would be obliged to follow the ethical guidelines that pertain to this type of research which would involve, amongst other conventions, seeking permission from subjects and anonymising of names (Ibid: 410). In this case, claims made by others such as Waskul and Douglas (1996) 'who have criticized the public/ private distinction as an ethical basis for using electronic texts without permission', were relevant (Ibid: 410).

Gurak and Silker concluded their discussion of rhetorical analysis, by advising researchers to 'draw on (their) own ethical instincts, copyright law and the doctrine of fair use, and the methodological choices made by others' when adapting this research method to fit the distinctive circumstances of cyberspace (Ibid: 411).

Gurak's analysis of an online protest demonstrated that the Internet's features of speedy delivery and its promise as equaliser of hierarchies allowed people of different social levels but with similar interests to organise themselves quickly and effectively around a particular contentious issue. The strong group *ethos* that evolved helped the cause greatly, yet at the same time it also brought forth another form of dominance.

Her study thus questioned the popular notion that the open dialogue enabled by the Internet would inevitably lead to more accurate and truthful information. Like Herring who had used computer-mediated discourse analysis to investigate the gendered bias of online discourse, Gurak's rhetorical analysis also took a critical look at the Internet's as perceived democratising space. Given that both studies were concerned with the analysis of texts produced on the Internet, Gurak voiced similar concerns relating to the challenge of applying rhetorical analysis to online texts as did Herring with regard to computer-mediated discourse analysis. The primary concern addressed by Gurak was also associated with the fuzzy nature of the data. The principal decision whether the selected texts resembled published documents or unpublished 'written conversations' was at the same time a methodological and ethical one that addressed issues such as obtaining permission, establishing whether or not the doctrine of fair use would apply and the disguised or open presence of the researcher .

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## 2.5. "Musical community of the Internet: An on-line ethnography"

### An on-line ethnography by René Lysloff (1997 – ongoing)

This on-line ethnography took its cue from the Internet 'as a technology (that) makes possible communities and new social practices that have been *unimaginable* before' (Lysloff, 2003: 236; italics in original). Accordingly, the ethnography described a

community whose existence was exclusively defined in terms of the Internet in that the technology not only enabled the reason for its being (on-line music production) but at the same time also provided the channels of communication that sustained social interaction (Ibid: 234). The portrayal of these social relationships that 'are mediated entirely through computer-based technology and the Internet' intended to demonstrate '...the ways in which this new set of material practices has in fact constituted a community composed of relationships that are socially meaningful to its members' (Ibid: 238). In this sense, technology was perceived '...as a cultural phenomenon that permeates and informs almost every aspect of human existence – including forms of musical knowledge and practice' (Ibid: 238).

The author had been observing and participating in the life of this virtual community for some years and had become thoroughly acquainted with the music-related activities and language practices of this group. During this extensive field work period, Lysloff also conducted interviews with composers, visited research web sites, collected relevant texts, and downloaded music files (Ibid: 235).

#### *The mod scene*

The on-line community that was at the centre of this study was referred to as the 'mod scene' by its members where 'mods are music files in binary form created through music editing programs known as mod trackers' (Ibid: 238). The technical jargon that is associated with this electronic production of music is quite complicated and will not be elaborated on. Suffice to say that creating or composing music (mods) using such program is a complex process that requires both skill and creativity. Mod composers made their mods available to the 'Internet community of mod enthusiasts' via mod websites. These Internet spaces did not only function as distribution channels for mod music files, but they were also important community centres where members could access information about "news of the scene, including news of 'compos' (mod composition contests) and related music events". Chat services and bulletin boards

attached to the websites provided opportunities for person to person communication thereby encouraging information exchange and 'the free flow of ideas' (Ibid: 239).

Mod files were usually accompanied by encoded text that might contain the composer's e-mail address, messages to fans or other composers, and their 'virtual signatures (often in the form of textual graphics)'. These signatures hardly ever referred to the composers' real identity, but were made-up 'futuristic or otherwise fantastic aliases' which were also known as 'handles' (Ibid: 239). As result of this practice and since mod members rarely met off line, social markers such as gender, education and race could be inferred from online behaviour, but otherwise largely remained hidden. The author noted, however, that composers and programmers are 'predominantly young...middle-class white Europeans or Americans, college educated and possessing some basic computer skills' (Ibid: 240).

The social order of the mod scene was shaped by a social hierarchy based mainly on prestige and authority. The highest level was accorded to 'seasoned' composers and computer programmers whose authority was linked to their extensive knowledge and experience. Although they exercised no 'real control over community members', they had considerable influence in setting the 'aesthetic standard' of the mod compositions. At the next level were young mod composers whose position rested mainly on prestige, namely, how well he was known as composer ('name recognition') and how large his fan community was. The lowest level was made up of 'apprentice composers' (newbies) and dedicated fans (Ibid: 242 – 243).

#### *Imaginary community in virtual places*

'The imagined community of the mod scene was certainly based on common purpose and a strong sense of place among its members' (Ibid: 244). Since the mod scene exists solely on the Internet, it follows that their 'sense of place' was anchored in that same technology. The web site became the centre of the group's activities; a place

that united its geographically dispersed members – it ‘institutionalized’ the group (Ibid: 244).

#### *Digital mediation and simulated materiality*

In contrast to other virtual communities where textual communication was the only activity that took place, the mod scene was primarily sustained by the production and distribution of ‘virtual products’. In other words, for the community to survive and flourish, members had to continually produce new compositions. Since mod files were freely shared amongst the members, financial gain was not the motive that drove this production, but rather (as Lysloff came to realise after some months of participant observation) ‘...the most important form of currency in the mod scene is an email message from a listener telling you that your music is awesome’ (Ibid: 246). The mod scene could thus be described as a ‘prestige economy’ where the incentive to produce was coupled to the reward in form of recognition, be it through mod reviews published on the web sites or in the form of listener comments like the one described above – it was social prestige that counted in the mod community (Ibid: 246).

#### *Musical creativity and ownership: Ripping*

Given that all mod music files were freely shared, mod composers were allowed to ‘rip’ the composition of others. This practice of ‘ripping’ as defined by the author ‘refers to the appropriation in the Ricouerian sense of taking something foreign and making it one’s own. In its most innocuous form, ripping is what many mod composers do all the time: they appropriate sound samples from other mod files’ (Ibid: 250). However, this practice was subject to an implicit understanding that the composers would inform or ‘at least acknowledge the owner of the samples they rip’. Transgressions of this unwritten rule might range from ‘simple discourtesy’ (not acknowledging the owner of a sample) to ‘plagiarizing an entire composition’ which boiled down to ‘outright theft’ (Ibid: 251). Since mod compositions were not copyrighted, legal action against the transgressor was no option. The group thus relied

on collective actions such as public humiliation or ‘virtual banishment’ of the offender to control plagiarism and music theft.

If ‘community’ is understood ‘as a collective and ongoing performative practice of group representation (to itself and others)’ then, the author argued, the mod scene portrayed in the course of this on-line ethnography constituted such a community. What was unique about the mod scene is in the ‘the way its members *use* computer technology to build, maintain, and represent real social relationships’ (Ibid: 257; italics in original).

An interesting contribution to what changes when the ethnography ‘moves from the physical spaces to the digital spaces’ (Wittel, 2000: ¶ 23) is Lysloff’s reflection on the differences and similarities between his earlier fieldwork that involved ‘research on rural musical traditions in a mountainous region of central Java’ and his current engagement with an on-line techno-musical community on the Internet (Lysloff, 2003: 234 – 236). In naming the similarities experienced while in the field, the author talked about, amongst others, a comparable investment in time and the intellectual challenges related to the subject of musical performance. Addressing the differences, the themes of ‘locality’ and ‘presence’ and ‘time’ predominated. Fieldwork in the realm of the Internet did not ‘make demands on my body’; informants were ‘people whose presence I could only infer from their textual messages’; ‘seemingly endless periods could actually be measured in seconds and minutes rather than days or weeks’ and ‘I wondered whether what I was doing really *was* fieldwork because I never had to go anywhere physically’ (Ibid: 235; italics in original). This last observation spoke to some of the most contentious issues in on-line research: how to define the ‘field’ in the absence of a physically bounded space. Secondly, the notion of ‘travel’ as the requirement of physical displacement became problematic for ethnographers that conducted research ‘without ever leaving my home’ (Ibid: 236). In his on-line ethnography of websites Lysloff addressed this concern as follows: ‘Websites are not fields in the traditional sense; research does not involve travel in the

conventional sense of a physical displacement. What brought us all together were the metaphorical places that stood as monuments to the social relationships created through them. Thus, Internet research entails a form of travel, in a metaphorical sense, to radically different kinds of social spaces' (Ibid: 236).

One of these social spaces that the author spent considerable time in has been described above. At the core of this online ethnography lies Lysloff's contention that the new technology had 'radically altered...our understandings of selfhood and community' (Ibid: 256). The traditional notion of community that relied to a great extent on physical proximity as its defining characteristic was no longer sustainable in a world where social groupings had emerged 'despite temporal and spatial displacement' (Ibid: 256). When viewed as 'a product...of shared *relationships* among people' rather than shared space, the author argues, then the mod scene as portrayed by the ethnography constituted such a community that emerged out of social relationships (Ibid: 256). Although ten years lie between the on-line ethnography of Lysloff's mod scene and the cultural study of MUD systems by Reid, and despite the different ways in which the authors approached the object Internet, the virtual communities that these two qualitative enquiries portray are remarkably similar. While Reid's "MUD systems contain communities that are 'created through symbolic strategies and collective beliefs'" (Reid, 1994: online), Lysloff's mod scene was '...formed entirely out of social relationships that are very real to its members – relationships emerging out of communication, exchange, common interests and purpose, and mutual commitment' (Lysloff, 2003: 256). This convergence of the findings suggests two things. Firstly, that the Internet is not a lean and impoverished medium as described by earlier researchers, but that 'the Internet as a technology makes possible communities' (Ibid: 236). Secondly, on-line ethnography is an appropriate research method to use when the intended outcome of the study is a 'thick description' that captures the meaning people attach to their activities and the context in which such meanings were produced.



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## **2.6. “Risk news in the world of Internet newsgroups”**

### **A critical textual analysis by Kay Richardson (2001)**

Richardson’s critical analysis of newsgroup exchanges addressed the issue of Internet newsgroups as medium of information exchange in the wider context of risk society analysis. Referring to scholars such as Anthony Giddens who have postulated that the world is shifting from modernity to a new social order, her definition of risk society analysis ‘suggests that the bad side effects of modernity – pollution, the fear of nuclear holocaust, radiation poisoning, global climate change and so on – are no longer side issues: the accumulation of such risks has reconfigured the project of modernity’ (Richardson, 2001: 51). In this new era of ‘risk society’ people turned to the mass media for information about and affirmation of the possible impact of these global risks. Internet newsgroups were one of the avenues people may choose to retrieve, request and give information regarding current risk discourse. The risk event that was discussed in this study was the threat the Mad Cow Disease (BSE) posed to human life and that reached its crisis point in 1996 (Ibid: 52).

The objectives of the analysis were twofold, namely:

- To 'demonstrate how the four key characteristics of newsgroup discourse give the groups a distinctive profile as a context for the mediation of news'
- To examine the 'newsworthiness and credibility' of the contributions with 'particular reference to the proposition that BSE posed a human health risk' (Ibid: 57).

The corpus selected for this research consisted of 36 messages that were contained in thirteen different threads (topics) and that were posted to newsgroups between the 20<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> March, 1996, this timeframe being identified by the author as the peak period of the BSE crisis. In addition, only messages with 'newslike information' were selected from the initial sample of 200, where 'newslike' refers to contributions that contained summaries of key events/ facts newly made public as expressed in the writer's own words (Ibid: 54).

The first part of the analysis focused on the four properties of information exchange on newsgroups, namely, the four I's: Interactive, International, Interested and Intertextual and how 'these four properties affected the ways in which BSE news was mediated during the BSE crisis period' (Ibid: 57).

- **Interactionality:** In a 'knowledge economy (that) operates as a hierarchical system' people might have come to distrust the information that was handed 'down' and might look for other channels to get the information they believed 'they are not getting'. Newsgroups, which are organised according to specific interests, provided this opportunity where users could share their knowledge by asking question and giving answers. For that reason, 'some newsgroup exchange is truly interactional and dialogic' (Ibid: 58). However, not all exchanges were that collaborative, and 'overt disagreements and confrontations' regarding, for instance, the reasons for the BSE crisis, were also amongst the messages sampled (Ibid: 58 – 59).
- **Internationality:** Due to the global nature of the Internet, users have access to the 'people on the spot', namely those living in countries that were currently

experiencing the risk, such as Britain and the BSE crisis. Furthermore, since the BSE was essentially a 'British' affair, it followed that British users would have had access to more comprehensive media coverage and as a result be more knowledgeable (Ibid: 60).

- Interest: Similarly, because of the great variety of newsgroups that served a particular topic, users could either choose to communicate with those that had similar interests or 'locate the kinds of knowledge/ expertise that they think they could benefit from' (Ibid: 62). Of the twelve newsgroups represented in the BSE sample, half were concerned with agriculture, the sector most affected by the crisis, while others focused on food or politics, amongst others.
- Intertextuality: In acknowledging the source of their information some of the writers referred to previous messages, while others pointed to external sources such as mass media content, speeches and reports or include links to websites that contain relevant material (Ibid: 63).
- Interpersonal: This fifth 'I' that was added by the author in a subsequent discussion of health risks on the Internet, concerned issues of credibility or trust. It was a 'significant feature' of most newsgroups that writers contributed in their personal capacity and hence there was 'no pre-configuration of expertise' in this context. In other words, '(i)t is within the contributions themselves that the question of credibility and trust must be addressed, and the information offered must be formulated with a view to having it accepted as reliable by other participants' (Richardson, 2003: 175).

Seen as a whole, these properties of newsgroups provided the context within which risk discourse could take place in a personal, interactive manner. Faced with the uncertainty as to the extent of the looming crisis and its implications for personal health and security, people could consult others directly with the view of obtaining more reliable information than might have been available via the mass media. Newsgroups thus "allow (some) 'ordinary people' to make their voices heard to a greater extent' (Richardson, 2001: 51) although the credibility and trustworthiness of some of these 'voices' may have been questionable.

The article itself did not mention ethical concerns besides a footnote that stated: 'I have indicated by way of source only the newsgroup of origin and eliminated all names, in order to protect confidentiality'. This statement reflected the ethical considerations put forward by another linguistic researcher (Herring, 1996c) in her critical discourse analysis of gender and ethics in computer-mediated environments which has been considered earlier on in this chapter. In clarifying her decision not to reveal the identity of her data sources, Herring pointed out that her 'intention was to respect the privacy of the individual participants, while preserving the academic freedom to criticize' (Herring, 1996d: 154). Moreover, not mentioning names was the 'usual practice in linguistic research' where the focus was on group and not individual linguistic variation (Ibid: 159).

Since Richardson identified herself as a member of the 'British Association for Applied Linguistics' (BAAL) on her university's web page, it was assumed that the ethical research guidelines proposed by this professional association would have influenced her 'usual research practice as linguist'. Accessing the 'Recommendations on Good Practice in Applied Linguistics' published by BAAL on the Internet revealed that the association had little guidance to offer in terms of 'Internet research'. Although quite recently updated (2006), the section on 'Responsibilities to Informants' included only a short passage on 'Internet research' that made reference to 'Ess and the Association of Internet Researchers (2002), and a personal list by Bruckman (2002)' for guidelines on online research while 'Herring (1996)' was to be consulted for 'ethical issues in linguistic research' (BAAL, 2006: 7). Ethical issues that were touched upon in the remainder of this subsection dealt with informed consent and confidentiality situated within the debate of public versus private assumptions of the research site. However, no clear guidelines were forthcoming, a state of affairs that apparently has not changed much since then.

This digression into the realm of professional ethical research guidelines leads to the tentative conclusion that Richardson's 'usual research practice' could have been

similar to that of Herring's given that both had to 'draw on (their) own ethical instincts, copyright law and the doctrine of fair use, and the methodological choices made by others' in making their individual ethical decisions (Gurak & Seiler, 1997: 411).

The critical textual analysis of Richardson examined the viability of Internet newsgroups as a medium of informal information exchange on risk news. The particular characteristics of the newsgroups – the five 'I's – provided the context that allowed people with similar interests and concerns to address risk issues directly rather than having to rely on official media sources. Here the Internet was portrayed as a liberating force that facilitated the 'voices' of ordinary people and gave them a measure of control over the 'search for information' (Richardson, 2001: 51). The credibility of the information source was a major issue that was constantly negotiated amongst members of these groups. Not only was the trustworthiness of news supplied by the official media questioned, but individuals' contributions were also examined as to their reliability and 'seriously off-track replies may be corrected or challenged by later contributors' (Ibid: 69). This inherently democratic practice had not been reported in equal measure in Gurak's rhetorical analysis of an online protest. In the online discussions around the MarketPlace database, 'dominant voices' reigned and participants, who were critical of these prominent texts, were sidelined. Likewise, the spread of inaccurate information went unchecked. Gurak had expressed her concern about this 'dark side' of the Internet that contradicted the popular belief in the technology's ability to act as leveller of hierarchies. These contrasting findings regarding the potential of the object Internet to enhance democracy can be attributed to a number of factors, one of which would be the difference in the research methods used.

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## **2.7. “Cousins Virtual Jane and Virtual Joe, extraordinary virtual helpers”**

**A design research study by Lynette Nagel, Seugnet Blignaut and Johannes**

**Cronjé.**

The increasing number of educational courses offered through the Internet attests to the long-standing interest of educational researchers in online learning environments. Examples of such innovative applications are the higher educational courses offered by universities and colleges that make use of the WebCT platform to facilitate online learning. This course management tool builds on the new technology's potential as 'global, instantaneous network of interaction' (Markham, 2004: 100) to provide 'anytime, anywhere and just-for-me education' (Blignaut & Nagel, 2009: 104) for a great number of students. Despite this great attraction of web-based courses to further higher education beyond the confines of the physical locale, the high attrition rates in these online courses remain a major challenge for designers, instructors and

facilitators (Ibid: 2009). Nagel et al (2007) attributed this low success rate to management problems such as 'ineffective course facilitation and lack of faculty communication (or) excessive instructor control' that contributed to student alienation as these 'often feel inadequate, lonely, and unmotivated' (Nagel et al, 2007: online). Previous research into online learning had demonstrated the crucial role of facilitators in the formation of virtual communities of learners that addressed feelings of alienation and promote collaboration, thereby increasing the success of online courses. In particular, the proposal by King (2002) who enlisted the help of a fictitious virtual student 'Joe Bags O'Donuts' to increase online students' participation and cooperation, had guided the intervention that this study was concerned with (Ibid: online; Blignaut & Nagel 2009: 106).

The setting within which this intervention took place was an online masters' level course on web-based learning offered by the Department of Education. Design or development research was the research method used within which the intervention was situated (Nagel et al, 2007: online). This fairly new approach to educational investigations is described by Reeves et al (2005): 'Design research is grounded in the practical reality of the instructor, from the identification of significant educational problems to the iterative nature of the proposed solutions' (Reeves et al, 2005: 107). At the same time, design research is more than just designing and testing interventions as '(t)heory informing practice is at the heart of approach, and the creation of design principles and guidelines enables research outcomes to be transformed into education practice' (Ibid: 107). In line with these principles, the design of the online course (intervention) presented the practical solution to the identified educational problem (high attrition rate). Consequently, the course design should promote online student involvement and the formation of a virtual learning community.

The course that was designed by the first author 'followed the model of *guide on the side*, allowing free-flowing discussions' (Nagel et al, 2007: online; italics in original) to

encourage student participation. What made this intervention quite different from others, however, was the presence of an additional student – ‘Methical Jane’ (where *methical* is a combination of *mythical* and *ethical*) – whose presence was supposed to dispel the prevailing notion of the instructor as person of authority and the students as passive recipients. This fictitious student – an additional log-in of the course facilitator – was modelled on the role of King’s ‘Virtual Joe’. Similar to Joe, Jane’s role as ‘the students’ friend, confidante and helper’ was ‘to stimulate online participation and to provide scaffolding for less competent students’, thereby modelling ‘collaborative behavior (that) fostered development of an online learning community’ (Ibid: online). Unlike Joe, however, her presence was not revealed to students, because, the authors reasoned, if the students had known from the start that the instructor doubled as Jane, this would have undermined the objective of the study. It was only at the end of the course that the students were debriefed and the identity of Virtual Jane revealed via email.

Besides investigating Virtual Jane’s contribution to the facilitation of the course and the effect of her presence on the online community, the study also explored the ethical implications of the covert assistant researcher by eliciting feedback from the students regarding their feelings ‘about the ethical issues of instructors’ hiding and then disclosing the identity of a virtual student’ (Ibid: online).

The course that was offered through the WebCT platform of the university attracted twenty-three students of whom eighteen completed the course successfully. Course-related communication was channelled through the ‘asynchronous courseroom’s discussion area’ while a separate space was allocated for informal conversations. Besides capturing the discussions posted in the courseroom, data was also obtained from the facilitator’s diary, live focus group interviews and from the conversations at a social gathering that included video footage as well (Ibid: online). The data collected was subjected to thematic content analysis using Atlas.ti™. The ‘six-category taxonomy of online interactions’ that had been developed in previous online research



by the first author was applied to the data (Blignaut & Nagel: 106). These categories include:

- Other messages: refer to 'social dialogue' that is not content related
- Administrative messages: regard course administrative issues such as deadlines, assignment formats and so forth
- Affective messages: express support or encouragement and 'provide affective support or apology' that is not content related
- Corrective messages: that require students to provide corrections or 'clear up misconceptions' that are content related
- Socratic message: 'contain academic content and aim to encourage deeper thinking'
- Informative messages: provide 'comment on a learner's posting' and individual feedback (Ibid: 107).

Evaluating the facilitator's and Virtual Jane's contribution to the facilitation of the course according to the six categories above and then comparing these results, revealed that Virtual Jane, in comparison to the facilitator, contributed proportionally more messages related to academic matters (corrective, Socratic, informative; supplementary facilitator role) while having the same or less to 'say' about non-academic issues (affective, administrative, other; participative student role) (Ibid: 107). According to the authors, these findings suggested that Virtual Jane succeeded in her role as supplementary facilitator which is associated with 'behavior characteristic of the learning virtual community' (Ibid: 110). However, conclusive evidence regarding Virtual Jane's effect on course participation was not forthcoming from the analysis as '(w)e cannot directly connect the presence of Virtual Jane in the courseroom with the 89% success rate of this particular course' (Ibid: 110).

Recommendations that emanate from this development study included, amongst others, that some of the 'predictable tasks' should be programmed by designers 'for

delivery by an online agent', since the double role of facilitator and virtual student made too great demands on a single person (Ibid: 110).

Regarding the ethical issues of this intervention, the authors' reason for keeping Jane's identity hidden for the duration course – in contrast to cousin 'Virtual Joe', the role model –

was: '(i)f students had known that Jane was the instructor, it would have defeated the object of the study, since generally speaking, South African students observe the institutional hierarchy and retain a respectful distance from instructors, not questioning teaching practice' (Ibid: online). Several comments in the article indicated the authors' awareness of and perhaps even trepidation about Jane's covert role as 'observant participant':

- commenting on the role of the 'covert assistant researcher...who could observe behavior not readily visible to the facilitator, a role with (hitherto) unexplored ethical implications' ;
- '...deceiving students requires careful ethical consideration';
- 'We carefully considered potential objections to this false identity...'
- 'Ethical considerations are at the core of this investigation; therefore, we obtained clearance from the Faculty of Education's research ethics committee before embarking on the research' (Nagel et al, 2007: online).

In justifying their 'unorthodox methods', the authors drew on Boeree (1998) who compared the collection of data on students' behaviour without their knowledge to 'spying', but then conceded that "(s)uch 'spying' is often considered acceptable, however, if a) students are debriefed afterwards, b) no harms comes of it, and c) the research benefits society in some way" (Boeree, 1998, paraphrased in Nagel et al, 2007: online). Adhering to the first of these conditions, the students were debriefed once the course was completed in order 'to comply with the ethical stricture not to deceive subjects' (Nagel et al, 2007: online). With regard to causing no harm to subjects, the authors' advice was that course designers should seek alternatives 'for

minimizing instructor dominance' if the students 'reject the notion of a virtual student'. Since Jane's disguise had been very effective, the students never suspected that Jane 'was not for real'. The last of the conditions implied that the 'ends justifies the means': 'Avoiding behaviors that upset students and confidently applying those that make a beneficial contribution, as *revealed through research like this, can help future course designers* to design more effective online facilitating presences' (Ibid: online, italics by author). What remains unanswered is whether the authors had considered the implications that might result from applying these *offline* ethical research guidelines to *online* research.

The feedback from the students regarding their reaction to being told that the facilitator doubled as 'Methical Jane' ranged from shock, disbelief and dismay to indifference to no response at all. In hindsight, the authors note that 'The success of creating a highly credible Jane also had its downside. Her very credibility caused students to feel more deceived when they learned the truth' (Ibid: online). However, 'Jane's encouragement allowed them to finish the course. We therefore feel that the ends justified the means' (Ibid: online).

Separate recommendations were offered regarding the ethical use of Virtual Jane. Disclosing the identity of the virtual student right from the start, as King (2002) had done should be considered if the '...the instructional designer's analysis of the student population shows that authority does not inhibit student participation' (Ibid: online). For instructors that plan to reproduce 'Methical Jane', the authors outlined the procedures that these studies should adhere to. Amongst these was the recommendation 'to allow the external supervision and monitoring of the activities of any undisclosed student' (Ibid: online).

In their discussion on 'ethical issues in qualitative e-learning research' Kanuka and Anderson (2007) commented on the 'confusion and uncertainty' reigning amongst educational researchers with regard to ethical issues that arise from using qualitative

research methods to study teaching and learning practises in online environments (Kanuka & Anderson, 2007: 1). These ethical dilemmas surfaced when – 20 years ago – e-learning researchers discovered that the application of existing ethical guidelines to online learning contexts proved to be problematic, especially with regard to ‘informed and voluntary consent, what is private and what is public, and anonymity, privacy, and confidentiality of the data collected’ (Ibid: 5). Since most e-learning research involves ‘human subjects’, usual practice was to obtain informed and voluntary consent from students before they participated in an intervention, ‘(e)xcept in cases where deception is relatively benign and integral to the research purpose’ (Ibid: 5). Furthermore, if consent could not be obtained beforehand, ‘it must be obtained as soon as possible after participation, usually in debriefing sessions immediately following the researcher’s intervention’ (Ibid: 5). The authors also recognized that a ‘degree of deception is implied’ in the absence of such procedures, the ethical implications of which were aggravated in virtual environments (Ibid: 8). However, in the absence of clear and documented guidelines pertaining to e-learning research, ‘sustaining ethical research on the Net’ must also rest on the ‘personal integrity of the researcher’ (Ibid: 8).

The study by Nagel et al demonstrated the application of a novel research method in educational research, namely design or development research. Closely related to action research, this method had been successfully applied in a number of interventions designed to resolve the educational problems encountered by educators (Reeves et al, 2005: 107). The intervention that this study described intended to address the low success rate of online higher education courses. To increase online student participation and thereby promote the development of a virtual learning community, the newly designed course included a ‘virtual student’ whose supportive role as additional covert research assistant was kept hidden from the students for the duration of the course. According to Nagel et al the covert presence of ‘Virtual Jane’ contributed to the success rate of the course. However, the emotional reactions of the students once the virtual student’s real identity was revealed casts doubt on the

researchers' affirmation that the ethical implications of this intervention had been carefully considered before implementing the course. This is not to say that the efforts of the researchers to minimise the risk associated with deceptive research were not sufficient. What is at stake here is the question whether the ends *really* justified the means in this case. However, even careful consideration of all possible risks does not eliminate the 'potential for harm to come to those subjects' (Reid, 1996: 173) as Reid's study has shown.

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## **2.8. “Virtual communities: A marketing perspective”**

**A netnography by Kristine de Valck (first author), Gerrit H. Van Bruggen and Berend Wierenga (2002 to 2005)**

Groups of people that interact primarily via the Internet have been variously named ‘virtual communities’ (Turkle, 1997), ‘computer-mediated social groups’ (Baym, 2002), ‘text-based virtual realities’ (Reid, 1994) or ‘computer-supported social networks’ (Wellman & Gulia, 1999), depending on the academic background of the researcher and her or his specific interest in online communication. Viewed from the perspective of marketing research, a number of these online social gatherings constitute ‘e-tribes’ or ‘virtual communities of consumption’, which ‘are a specific subgroup of virtual communities that explicitly center upon consumption-related interests. They can be defined as affiliative groups whose online interactions are based upon shared enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, a specific consumption activity or related group of activities’ (Kozinet, 1999: 54). These ‘consumption activities’ referred to here may include a shared interest in, for example, a specific brand of car or technological equipment; a special type of food or beverage; a particular TV show or film or fashion – the Internet provides a host of such consumer-orientated interest groups on newsgroups, bulletin board systems, chat rooms, Web forums, blogs, social network sites and so forth (Kozinet, 2006a: 281). These virtual communities provide the platform where members can seek information, ask for advice from experts or speak about their consumption experiences. While the primary purpose for joining such groups may be the exchange of information, members may form close ties with others based on their common interest and passion (Kozinet, 1999: 254).

Since such ‘virtual communities of consumption represent substantial social networks of consumer knowledge and companionship that affect consumer behaviour’ (de Valck et al, 2009: 185), marketing researchers recognise them as significant research sites whose study could inform corporate managers’ marketing decisions. To exploit this rich data source, Kozinets extended ‘market-orientated’ ethnography to suit the

investigation of naturally occurring consumer interactions in the virtual environment. “‘Netnography’, or ethnography of the Internet, is a new qualitative research methodology that adapts ethnographic research techniques to study the cultures and communities that are emerging through computer-mediated communication’ (Kozinets, 2002: 62). Based on his research experiences in online environments and refined over the years, Kozinets presented netnography as a rigorous research methodology replete with detailed field procedures that included: ‘(1) making cultural entrée, (2) gathering and analyzing data, (3) ensuring trustworthy interpretation, (4) conducting ethical research, and (5) providing opportunities for culture member feedback’ (Kozinets, 2002: 63; Kozinets, 2006b: 130). Since then, netnography has been used in numerous marketing studies, an example of which follows.

The study to be discussed ‘unobtrusively peeks’ into the life of an online forum whose members shared a passion for food and where discussions revolved around cooking and eating habits. Existing theories pertaining to interpersonal influence provided the background against which ‘the interaction dynamics of (this) culinary community’ were investigated with the aim ‘to analyse how the members communicate with and influence each other’ and ‘to gain insight in their discourse with respect of the community’s focal consumption activity’ (de Valck et al, 2009: 197). Interpersonal influence was displayed in the community’s role as ‘informational reference group’ which was based on the assumption, amongst others, that information and advice that had been provided by fellow members was perceived as ‘more credible and relevant’ than that generated by commercial enterprises. The way in which this information is shared amongst community members is referred to as ‘word-of-mouth’ communication, a concept that describes the ‘informal transmission of ideas, comments, opinions and information’ between individuals that are not marketers. ‘These social network qualities coupled with the perceived credibility of consumer evaluations make the virtual community a powerful platform for exploiting consumer-to-consumer recommendations’ (Ibid: 186 – 187).

Following the guidelines of Kozinets, the greater part of the netnography consisted of the unobtrusive observation of the discourse taking place within the culinary community. This involved the monitoring of forum discussions and contributions, and the perusal of member pages. The netnographic data collected through this three-year immersion in the community was triangulated with in-depth interviews conducted with some of the participants and the administrator of the online forum (Ibid: 197; Kozinets, 2002: 65; Kozinets, 2006b: 133). Iterative content analysis was performed on the postings of the selected discussion threads. In addition, e-profiles of members that participated in the selected discussions were compiled, based on these members' personal web pages (contributions in the form of recipes, articles and so forth) and the content of their 'guest books' (message exchanges between individual members) (de Valck et al, 2009: 197).

Classifying the 'communicative acts that participants engage in according to their overall goal' revealed 'four main frames of discussion' (Ibid: 198):

- (1) *Sharing knowledge*: A great deal of the contributions posted revolved around requests for information and offering of advice concerning culinary matters such as food preparation, kitchen utensils and recipes. Inquiring into the motives for this knowledge-sharing revealed that, besides wanting to 'truly help others', participants also made use of the opportunity to display their 'culinary expertise' based on their extensive experience. Expertise was also demonstrated by invoking authority, where participants as 'experts of local cuisine' were accorded greater credibility than authoritative sources in mass media (Ibid: 198).
- (2) *Negotiating norms*: Culinary matters being the shared passion amongst participants, 'community norms about cooking and eating' were discussed at length. Two issues were at the centre of such negotiations: 'what constitutes a good cook and what constitutes a healthy diet?' (Ibid: 198). Establishing the merits of a good cook involved elaborate discussions and comparisons of participants' own special recipes and cooking habits. In contrast, negotiations as to what constitutes a healthy diet acknowledged the reference norm set by an outside



'authoritative agency' such as a public health institution. Hence discussions focused more on how to apply the norm to practice as illustrated by the forum's debate 'whether pizza is junk food or not' (Ibid: 199). Whilst negotiating community standards of best practice, participants also made reference to the cooking and eating habits of other people that do not meet these norms. A favourite target was the mother-in-law whose 'terrible cooking qualities' were obviously not up to standard! All these discussions clearly indicated that participants '...believe that, in contrast to the ordinary consumer, they are culinary experts who truly appreciate the art of cooking with the right ingredients' (Ibid: 199).

(3) *Opposing values*: Negotiations did not always lead to consensus, but occasionally resulted in heated debates and open conflict. One such contested subject concerned the preparation of food with fresh versus ready-made products. Tension ensued when derogatory statements made by 'pro-fresh' contenders let some participants, who admitted to using ready-made products, feel like 'culinary underdogs'. These again retaliated by implying that the 'pro-fresh' group was not completely honest in their declaration about always using fresh produce. According to de Valck et al, community conflicts like these revealed 'two areas of tension between forum participants that are exemplary of their interaction dynamics and the process of interpersonal influence following from it' (Ibid: 199). While some participants take a more casual interest in cooking, others are 'truly passionate about cooking'. These 'differing levels of culinary involvement' and the different lifestyle of participants that reflect their varied personal backgrounds formed the backdrop against which community interaction had to be understood (Ibid: 199).

(4) *Celebrating similarities*: Despite the above-mentioned differences and the occasional disruptions, their prevailing interest in eating and cooking unified participants and promoted the formation of a community where even self disclosure about generally unacceptable behaviour, such as gluttony, is celebrated 'as a sign of (their) shared fondness of food' (Ibid: 200).

The results of this study as presented in these four frames of discussion emphasised the ‘...complexity of virtual communities as sites of interpersonal influence between community members. It is not just about information exchange related to specific purchase decisions, but community members engage in far more encompassing communicative acts to define, negotiate, argue, and cheer about value systems surrounding the community’s focal topic of interest’ (Ibid: 200). These insights into consumer behaviour have various implications for market researchers, such as the benefit marketers could gain from using the services of ‘experts of local cuisine’ for word-of-mouth recommendation. In recognising the limitations of the study, the authors cautioned that although the conclusions of the study may serve as ‘starting point’ when considering their application to the development of marketing strategies, further research would be necessary before final recommendations were made (Ibid: 200). This word of caution echoed Kozinets’s directive that states:

‘Generalizations to markets or communities other than the one studied, online or offline must have corroborating evidence. To be trustworthy, the conclusions of a netnography must reflect the limitations of the online medium and the technique.’ (Kozinets, 2002: 65).

Netnography ‘is both naturalistic and unobtrusive – a unique combination’ that allows an ‘unprecedented level of access to heretofore unobservable behaviors of interacting consumers.’ (Ibid: 62, 63). As ‘professional lurkers’, market researchers may observe and download text-based virtual communications between consumers without the participants being aware of the researcher’s presence. While the data obtained in this way yields rich insights into consumer behaviour, ‘it is not given specifically and in confidence to the market researcher’ (Ibid: 65). According to Kozinets, the covert nature of such researcher behaviour addresses two contentious ethical issues:

- (1) ‘Are online forums to be considered a private or a public site? and
- (2) What constitutes ‘informed consent in cyberspace?’ (Ibid: 65)

Since clear ethical guidelines addressing these concerns had not been established as yet, Kozinets recommended four ethical research procedures that netnographers 'are obliged to consider and follow'. These procedures were informed by the ethical choices made by other Internet researchers (Reid, 1996; King, 1996; Sudweeks & Rafaeli, 1996; Sharf, 1999) that address the specific ethical concerns of netnography such as: 'privacy, confidentiality, appropriation of other's personal stories, and informed consent' (Ibid: 65). Based on these considerations, the four ethical procedures encompassed:

- (1) Full disclosure of the researcher's presence, affiliations and intentions to potential participants
- (2) Protection of anonymity and confidentiality of informants
- (3) Elicit and incorporate feedback from participants
- (4) Obtain permission (informed consent) to directly quote original postings. This procedure addresses the issue of the public versus private nature of the online research environment (Ibid: 65).

As an additional safeguard, member checks were recommended. Kozinets maintained that this procedure, whereby participants are presented with and can comment on the final findings of the research, would '...help ameliorate some of the contentious ethical issues ...while still preserving the value of unobtrusive observation' (ibid: 66).

Returning to the netnography of the virtual culinary community, it is observed that these ethical guidelines had been closely followed by the researchers. Since discussions on the forum were archived and publicly accessible, de Valck et al decided that the data used in the analysis were within the public domain. In addition, the community's policy stated 'that all content may be downloaded, stored, printed, and distributed for non-commercial purposes' (de Valck et al, 2009: 198). Following the guidelines as proposed by the 'Association of Internet Researchers' (AoIR, 2002), informed consent was thus not sought from individual forum members, a decision that was reinforced by the forum administrators' assurance that 'all contributions may

be used unrestrictedly and indefinitely' (Ibid: 198). However, in following 'Kozinets's conservative guideline about ensuring confidentiality', the names of the participants were replaced with pseudonyms where direct quotes were used in the report. Furthermore, the first author's personal web page within the forum included information related to the aims, methods and ethics of the study. As for Kozinets's recommendation regarding member checks, this procedure was adhered to by posting the 'evolving netnography...in its entirety to the community to elicit member feedback' (Ibid: 198).

The findings of this netnographic study contributed to the understanding the communicative practices of culinary communities. Presented as 'four main frames of discussion', these practices were classified as: sharing knowledge, negotiating norms, opposing values and celebrating similarities. To conclude the review of this study, it may be said that it is a fine exemplar of a netnography as proposed by its inventor.

Kozinets netnography has been widely applied in market research studies. A comparison between the recommended ethical practices of Kozinets's netnography and those adhered to by other qualitative researchers such as Roberts, highlights the differences with respect to ethical research practice that exists between the various disciplines. While Roberts's commitment to ethical research conduct defined her overt role of participant observer, Kozinets's 'professional lurker' portrays the usual practice in market research. Furthermore, whilst one of Reid's ethical decisions was to ensure the confidentiality of participants, de Valck et al considered this practice recommended by Kozinets as 'conservative'. These divergent approaches 'reflect the *diversity* of methodologies, disciplines, and ethical approaches relevant to online research' (Ess, 2002: 178; italics on original).

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## **2.9. “The new third places: Massively Multiplayer Online Gaming in American youth culture”**

### **A cognitive ethnography by Constance A. Steinkuehler (2002 – 2005)**

In the beginning of the 1990s when Reid conducted her ethnography on virtual worlds, the Multi-User Dungeons (MUDS) that were the object of her study, consisted of nothing but text. Since then the virtual world of social games has gone through a series of remarkable technological changes to evolve into the present-day highly graphical two-or three-dimensional videogames played online. Even though their appearance has changed – textually created characters have turned into graphically represented ‘avatars’ – the new generation of players is as fascinated about and committed to the virtual world as was the case in the ‘olden days’. According to Steinkuehler, for American youths (online) these Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) ‘are a – if not the – leading form of entertainment, despite their complexity and the considerable cognitive investment they exact from those who play’ (Steinkuehler, 2005a: 30).

The increasing number of 'innovative curricular designs that incorporate online collaborative environments' (Steinkuehler, 2004: online), attest to the long-standing interest of educational researchers in online virtual communities. However, few have investigated the possibility of utilising the social and learning potential of MMOGs for educational purposes. One of the first projects to realise the educational potential of MMOGs is Barab's 'Quest Atlantis' – a game that is 'fun and educational and that engages children in important personal, social, ethical, and environmental issues' (Barab et al, 2005: 87). The game was developed in collaboration with teachers and school children, an approach which the researchers identified as 'design-based research' that emphasises 'socially responsive design...of sociotechnical structures' (Ibid: 88). In contrast to this collaborative approach, Steinkuehler's investigation into the potential use of MMOGs within an educational setting comprised three phases that built on each other, namely:

- Laying the foundation: by conducting a cognitive ethnography of the 'naturally occurring, self-sustaining *indigenous* virtual cultures' of MMOGs to inform educational theory (Steinkuehler, 2007a: online);
- Focused empirical investigation: of specific research questions in two different contexts (MMOGs and a social network site) to identify more clearly to what extent the 'patterns of practice' that emerged from the cognitive ethnography apply to virtual world environments in general (Ibid: online);
- Designing MMO-based activities: where the design is based on the outcomes of the two previous investigations that enabled the understanding of the 'educationally valued practices' that result from the participants' interaction within virtual environments (Ibid: online).

The overall goal of this ongoing research project was 'to explicate the kinds of social and intellectual activities in which gamers routinely participate, including individual and collaborative problem solving, identity construction, apprenticeship, and literacy practices' (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006: online). The first phase had been completed

and the results of this cognitive ethnography of the MMOG *Lineage* are the subject of this discussion.

Drawing on Hutchins (1995), Steinkuehler portrayed cognitive ethnography as ‘the description of specific cultures in terms of their cognitive practices, their basis, and their consequences’ (Steinkuehler, 2007a: online). Williams (2006) highlights the difference between conventional and cognitive ethnography, stating that the former ‘describes knowledge’, while the latter ‘describes how knowledge is constructed and used’ (Williams, 2006: online). ‘Cognitive ethnography looks at the process: at the moment-to-moment development of activity, and its relation to sociocultural (often institutional) processes unfolding in different time scales’ (Ibid: online).

Similar to conventional ethnography, the cognitive ethnography conducted by Steinkuehler incorporated both a ‘*thick description*’ of ‘the forms of participation and meaning making that emerge in the MMOGameplay’ (Steinkuehler, 2005b: 98) and ‘strategic data collection and analysis methods’ (Steinkuehler, 2005a: 20). Data was collected by a (two-year) participant observation in the daily life of the game, by conducting unstructured and semi-structured interviews with snowball sample of sixteen key informants and through the collection of community documents such as ‘player-authored user manuals, fan sites, fan fiction, game-related discussion boards’ (Ibid: 20). Inductive content analysis was applied to the data using qualitative data analysis software to identify major themes and patterns within those themes. Throughout the ongoing ethnography, Discourse analysis (Gee, 1999) was used ‘as the fundamental basis for analysis in order to tease out how the underlying assumptions...participants held about the virtual social and material world were created, maintained, and transformed by specific individuals and social groups whose way of being in the world underwrite them’ (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006: online).

One of the outcomes of this substantial ‘discourse-analysis-based ethnographic work’ (Steinkuehler, 2004: online) that is of greater relevance to qualitative Internet

research, is the effect MMOG activities have on social engagement. In describing the literacy practices that members of *Lineage* engaged in, Steinkuehler noted that the game's discussion boards "function as one novel form of new 'third places'". In other words, besides channelling the written conversations of members, these online forums also provided spaces where members could socialise and build relationships 'beyond the workplace and home' (Steinkuehler, 2007b: 313). This statement is the topic of the discussion that follows.

The discussion is framed by Oldenburg's argument that the decline of 'third places' – informal social meeting places outside the home or work – in America impacts negatively on both individuals and communities: "The essential group experience is being replaced by the exaggerated self-consciousness of individuals. American lifestyles, for all the material acquisition and the seeking after comforts and pleasures, are plagued by boredom, loneliness, alienation." (Oldenburg, 1999: 13, quoted in Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006: online). Steinkuehler's response to this observation proposed that virtual environments, such as the MMOGs, 'function... as new (albeit digitally mediated) third places much like the pubs, coffee shops, and other hangouts of old' (Steinkuehler, 2005a: 21). To substantiate this counter-argument, the author demonstrated that MMOGs satisfied Oldenburg's 'eight defining characteristics of third places' (Ibid: 21):

- I. *Neutral ground*. 'First and foremost, third places are neutral grounds where individuals are free to come and go as they please.' (Ibid: 21). This is especially true for digitally mediated spaces such as the MMOG where the players (avatars) logged on and off as they wished and where they were under no obligation to participate in any online activity or game adventure unless they chose to do so. This allowed for 'interaction and engagement without the sorts of entanglements Oldenburg argues are deleterious to informal sociability' (Ibid: 22).
- II. *Leveler*. 'A second and related criterion...is that an individual's rank and status in the home, workplace, or society are of no importance' (Oldenburg, 1999,



quoted in Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006: online). In the anonymous virtual game world, social stratification was based on 'in-game wit, diligence and hard work' and not on real-world status. In this sense, MMOGs 'function as kind of level playing field' (Ibid: online).

- III. *Conversation is the main activity.* "These first two characteristics...merely set the stage for the 'cardinal and sustaining activity of third places everywhere' (Oldenburg 1999: 26, quoted in Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006: online): conversation". A fundamental feature of virtual game playing is the 'incessant and ubiquitous' text-based interactions that sustain the game and that encourage the formation of 'relationships of solidarity...and in-game community'. These 'constant conversation(s)' that can take place simultaneously on two or more of the several chat channels available, often move 'beyond the game' to discussions about politics, girlfriends, movies and so on, or may be carried on in the 'private channel' if it concerns a personal matter. MMOGs were thus 'thoroughly social in nature' (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006: online; Steinkuehler 2005a: 24-25).
- IV. *Accessibility & accommodation.* Third places must be easy to access: "One may go alone at almost any time of the day or evening with the assurance that acquaintances will be there" (Oldenburg, 1999: 32, quoted in Steinkuehler, 2005a: 25). This property does apply to MMOGs in so far as players may log on whenever it suits them and always find someone 'there'. Game worlds are 'continually available social spaces' (Ibid: 25) enabled by the time-compression feature of the technology and the 'omnipresence' of its dedicated members.
- V. *The regulars.* "It is the regulars who give the place its character and who assure that on any given visit some of the gang will be there" (Oldenburg, 1999: 33 - 34, quoted in Steinkuehler, 2006: online). The two types of 'regulars' that join MMOGs and whose presence sets the tone of the game are the guild members and the squatters in specific virtual areas. The 'omnipresence' of the guild members, the 'oldtimers' sets the 'tone of

conviviality' that is ascribed to their supportive role in the game. Squatters determine 'the social context specific to various areas in the game' (Ibid: 26).

VI. *A low profile*. While Oldenburg's third places are 'characteristically homely', MMOGs are 'characteristically fantastic' in their decor and outlay. From this follows that MMOGs' virtual environments defy this property. However, when 'homely' is interpreted to mean 'ordinary', then older versions of the game may be regarded as 'homely' in comparison to the "latest 'in' game released" (Ibid: 27).

VII. *The mood is playful*. As the author noted, this point hardly merited discussion as this property of third places is the defining characteristic of MMOGs. 'If one theme emerge(d)' from the ethnography of *Lineage* 'it is one of abundant playfulness' (Ibid: 28).

VIII. *A home away from home*. The 'home-like quality of third places' as proposed by Oldenburg, was defined by five traits of 'home': rootedness, feelings of possession, spiritual regeneration, feelings of being at ease, and warmth (Ibid: 28). The first of these, rootedness, referred to a physical centre around which members' activities were organised. In the virtual world, this rootedness found expression in the persistent daily participation in the game by its members, where longer absences were noted and commented on. The second trait, "a sense of 'possession and control...that need not entail actual ownership' from those who attend them" (Oldenburg, 1999: 40, quoted in Steinkuehler, 2005a: 28) was well established amongst members of MMOGs to the extent that court battles had been fought over the legal rights to virtual possessions such as avatars and equipment. Together, rootedness and feelings of possession 'create a shared sense of home' (Ibid: 29).

In conclusion, the author argued that MMOGs 'indeed function as a third place for informal sociability' albeit in textual rather than embodied form. From an educational researcher's perspective, MMOGs needed to be seriously considered as 'sites for socially and materially distributed cognition, complex problem solving, identity work,

individual and collaborative learning across multiple multi-media...and rich meaning-making and, as such, ought to be part of the educational research agenda.' (Ibid: 30).

Commenting on the challenges that the online cognitive ethnography presented, Steinkuehler briefly noted that protecting the identity of participants in an online world where everything is archived and 'Google-able' is not only difficult but next to impossible. Tensions ensued when the triangulation of sources threatened the privacy of 'confidants'. Finally, getting consent from parents of minors and 'leaving the field' when the 'work is done' were some of the 'old issues' that take on a 'new form' in the online environment. These challenges require 'constant negotiation and engineering', an effort that 'will remain necessary if we are to understand cognition and culture in a world that, increasingly, logs in' (Steinkuehler, 2005b: 98).

McKee and Porter (2009) article offered a very thoughtful discussion of 'ethical issues specific to conducting Internet research in MMOGs and virtual worlds' that included, amongst others, interviews conducted with Steinkuehler and four other researchers of MMOGs (Massively multiplayer Online Games) regarding their views related to research ethics (McKee & Porter, 2009: 1). A synopsis of the interviews was presented as 'approaches' to be considered by those who intend doing research in virtual:

- 'Recognize that research in virtual worlds cannot be conducted exactly as off-line, "real-world" spaces and places;
- Recognize that no given location in virtual worlds can be clearly and unproblematically labeled simply as "public" or "private";
- Respect privacy of individuals (persons and avatars), particularly with (a) high level of interaction, or (b) sensitive topic;
- Earn credibility through time in world;
- Treat the game/virtual world as "real" — or at least insofar as the gamers/residents do;
- Respect norms of the community/ies, especially when considering what data to collect and whether to obtain informed consent or not;

- Strive for transparency by identifying themselves as researcher when in researcher role.' (Ibid: 33).

These recommendations, which reflect the ethical concerns that have been addressed by Internet researchers since the early 1990s, 'assign considerable authority to local conditions' (Ibid: 33). In other words, they emphasise the need for researchers to respect and attend to the 'norms and expectations for a given world or game' in their research conduct.

The description of the virtual game *Lineage* as 'a home away from home' (Steinkuehler, 2005: 28) emulates the sentiment expressed in the portrayal of the online communities that were the objects of the online ethnographic studies discussed so far: the social MUDs, the mod scene and the culinary community. In labelling their Internet object 'community', these qualitative researchers identified the 'communicative practices' or 'social relationships' of its members as the unifying factor. In other words, in making their object, these researchers could no longer rely on physical features as boundary markers, but instead 'ethnographers might find more accuracy in using discourse patterns to find boundaries' (Markham, 2005: 801). This fundamental change in defining the field of study constitutes one of the major methodological challenges that qualitative Internet researchers have to deal with. Instead of physical makers, such as town limits, the boundaries markers in online environments are 'underwritten by the researcher's choice about how to find data sites (and) which search engine to use to sample' (Ibid: 801).

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## **CONCLUSION**

The studies presented in this chapter are testimony to nearly twenty years of qualitative Internet research. In following the 'traces' that these studies leave behind, it reveals the immense progress that has been made in this short time, both on the technological and methodological front. This development is, of course, most obvious in the transformation of the objects of the Internet as evident in the metamorphosis of the MUD from a simple, text-based program stored on a large floppy to a sophisticated three-dimensional simulated world populated with avatars that can be transported by means of a slim memory stick. Similarly, the remarkable success of social network sites amongst the new generation of Internet users is reminiscent of the early Internet's success story of the email application.

Qualitative researchers have also responded to the methodological challenges posed by the new technology and adapted established methods to suit the new research environment. The qualitative 'methodological tool kit' has been expanded to include virtual ethnography, netnography, computer-mediated analysis, network action research and others that are still to come as technological advances open up new possibilities and challenges for qualitative research on the Internet.

Amidst these great strides that have been made on various fronts, one 'specific anxiety' that remains largely unsolved and is still highly debated, concerns the ethics of online research. These ethical issues have been touched upon as they emerged in the course of the studies presented above. The dialogue that has thus begun will be continued in the next chapter that addresses the ethics of qualitative Internet research in more detail.

### **CHAPTER 3 ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF QUALITATIVE INTERNET RESEARCH**

The 'specific anxiety' related to the ethics of online research concerns the challenges Internet researchers are faced with when applying existing ethical guidelines to the 'unique circumstances of doing research in cyberspace, where traditional ethical guidelines related to consent/ assent and confidentiality are not automatically applicable' (Whiteman, 2007: 2). This situation '...was resulting in confusion and uncertainty among both researchers and ethics review board members. Two decades later we continue to be plagued by these same ethical issues' (Kanuka, 2007: 1).

In response to these ethical dilemmas, the Association of Internet Researchers established a working committee that developed a set of recommendations on the ethics of Internet research (Ess and the Association of Internet Researchers Ethics Committee 2002). These recommendations were formulated as a set of questions and answers (advice) that address the diverse situations that research on the Internet may entail. By working through these questions researchers are guided in the ethical decision-making in their own practice. However, as the technology advances new ethical situations arise that may not be adequately addressed by such guidelines. The situation that currently exists can then be portrayed as follows: qualitative Internet researchers are required to follow the ethical guidelines as laid down by their professional bodies and the institutional review boards. These guidelines are based on the ethical principles that regulate human subjects research in the biomedical and behavioral sciences (NCPHSBBR) and that do not necessarily address the specific circumstances of the online environment. Ethical issues that concern the special case of Internet are either only briefly or not at all dealt with in professional guidelines. To place this discussion into context, a brief account of the origin and trajectory of research ethics is in order.

### **3.1. A brief review of the origin and trajectory of research ethics**

The emergence of research ethics is generally associated with the reported abuses of human subjects in medical experiments by Nazi Germany during the Second World War. The Nuremberg Code that was released in 1947 attests to the need to protect basic human rights in the face of such atrocities. The World Medical Association's Declaration of Helsinki of 1964 was based on the provisions of the Nuremberg Code and has been described as the most important international declaration of human rights (Ess, 2007: 485). A series of ethically controversial research practices – such as the Tuskegee study - that came to light in the sixties and seventies led to the formation of the United States' National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (NCPHSBBR). This commission was tasked with the formulation of guidelines for ethical practice in biomedical and behavioural research (Israel & Hay, 2006: 34).

The Belmont Report that was subsequently developed and based on the Nuremberg Code, '...is a statement of basic ethical principles and guidelines that should assist in resolving the ethical problems that surround the conduct of research with human subjects'. The report set out three principles that are 'particularly relevant to the ethics of research involving human subjects: respect for persons, beneficence and justice' (NCPHSBBR, 1979). The applications of these principles 'as requirement for the conduct of ethical research' include, amongst others, informed consent and a 'favourable risk-benefits assessment' (Israel & Hay, 2006: 37). The three basic principles informed legislation intended to protect human rights, institutional review board guidelines and the professional code of ethics of various disciplines. However, applying these ethical guidelines to online research that did not involve 'identifiable subjects' proved problematic as '...it was by no means clear that the human subjects protections codes, developed in medicine and the social sciences to prevent harm to offline persons and minds, had any relevance to research on online communication and interaction' (Ess, 2007: 486).



### 3.2. The ethical challenges of qualitative Internet research

Doing ethical research online proved to be problematic for Internet researchers as the ethical guidelines they were expected to follow did not make provision for the special circumstances of Internet research. What little guidance they provided was normally formulated as brief statements. Amongst the various difficulties that the authors experienced in their bid to apply the existing ethical codes of their disciplines to research in the online environment, are issues such as the problem to obtain informed consent from groups whose member base is constantly changing. Asking permission from participants to quote their contributions in the research report was sometimes impossible as the authors of these texts could not be located.

Diverse, discipline-specific approaches to these challenges have been observed. Foremost is the debate that addresses the nature of the online environment. Drawing on the analogy of the Internet as a *place*, invokes the 'spatial paradigm', whereby participants of chat rooms, Usenet groups and so forth are perceived as '*people*' or '*individuals*' who engage in '*dialogue*' and whose rights are anchored in the three ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence and justice. On the other hand, viewing online interactions as *texts* that are produced and owned by '*authors*', fosters the analogy of the Internet as *site of textual production* and human subject regulations do not apply. While researchers of the social sciences tend to adhere to the human subjects research model, humanities scholars view the Internet as 'culturally produced object' and subsequent ethical obligations invoke the concepts of ownership, copyright and fair use. The application of these metaphors can be observed in, for example, the difference between the studies of Roberts and Reid (psychology and cultural studies) who researched the virtual communities of MUDs and the analysis of online text that was the focus of Herring's and Gurak's studies.

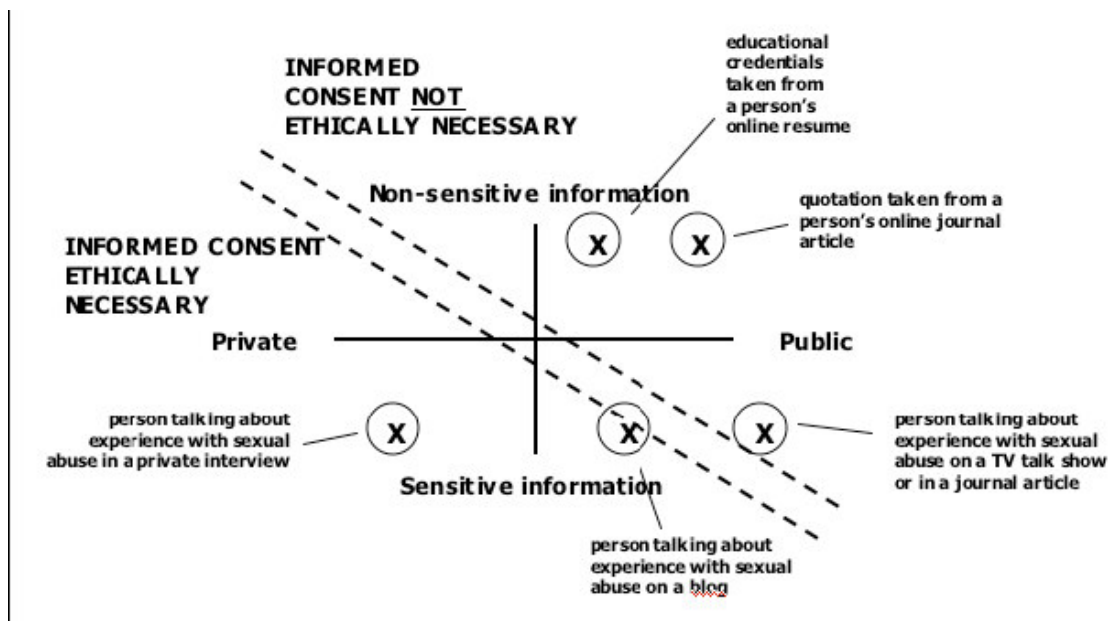
From the above discussion it follows that the researcher's crucial decision whether the object of the Internet constitutes a place or is a site of textual production is at the time also an ethical decision since it determines the subsequent approach to the

ethical decisions regarding informed consent, confidentiality, researcher presence and so forth. These decisions, however, also depend to a great extent on the degree of privacy these settings supposedly offer, as conversations and texts that are considered to be in the public domain require less stringent ethical procedures than those where members expect to be left undisturbed by ‘research-paparazzi’ (Chen et al, 2004: 160). Most Internet objects exhibit both of these settings: a public room open to all and private domains that are only accessible to the owner and invited guests. To complicate matters further, the sensitivity of the topic or purpose of the Internet group to be studied also needs to be carefully weighed up. Reid’s account of her experience while researching a social support group for survivors of sexual abuse showed that people can actually come to harm in Internet research. Furthermore, these decisions must be made before research commences as these not only have methodological consequences but, most importantly, determine whether informed consent is required.

Considering the variations that may result from the different combinations of these three decision-making levels – persons/ text, private/ public, sensitive/ non-sensitive – it is not surprising that qualitative Internet researchers are not served well with ethical guidelines that do not address these issues. McKee and Porter offer a helpful diagram (on the next page) that can assist novice Internet researchers in making the right decision that leads to ethical and responsible research conduct.

The explanation concerning this diagram notes that: ‘What this mapping strategy visualizes is Sveningsson’s point that neither the public-private continuum nor the sensitive-nonsensitive continuum is by itself a sufficient basis for deciding whether informed consent is necessary’ (McKee & Porter, 2009: 11). The original grid contained two diagonal lines with the vertical line representing the private/ public continuum and the horizontal line the sensitive/ non-sensitive continuum. Each block of the grid thus corresponded to a different combination of these two variables (Sveningsson, 2004: 55 – 56). The diagonal added by McKee and Porter divided this

original grid into two zones: ‘the zone where informed consent is definitely necessary (private-sensitive information) and the zone where it definitely isn’t (public-nonsensitive information)’ (McKee & Porter, 2008: 11). The five different research activities that have been plotted on the grid serve as guiding examples. This grid visualises Sveningsson’s point ‘that neither the private/ public nor the sensitive-nonsensitive continuum by itself is a sufficient basis for deciding whether informed consent is necessary. A researcher must take both into account’ (Ibid: 11).



**FIGURE 1.** Mapping types of interactions with research participants (adaptation of Sveningsson) (McKee & Porter, 2008, p. 732)

Original obtained from: McKee, H.A. & Porter, J.E. (2009).

The practical difficulties associated with obtaining informed consent from online participants, especially minors, have been vividly illustrated in a number of the studies reviewed. Some are obviously overwhelmed by this effort and resort to an attitude of ‘best effort’ as did the researcher that “...felt that asking ‘consent’ was necessary but using the material anyway was ethical if she couldn’t locate the author/ creator’ (Bruckman, 2002: 223).

The ethical issue of anonymity – whether to hide or reveal the participants' identity in published accounts – follows the same ethical-decision making path as described above. Where sensitive, private information is revealed, in other words, for high risk groups, the authors not only anonymised participants' contributions but also kept the name of the Internet group hidden to prevent public exposure and possible harm to the individual and group. However participants may insist on being named, as was the case in both Roberts and Reid's study.

The presence (or otherwise) of the researcher is of particular ethical concern for Internet research that follows the human subjects model. The Internet allows 'an unprecedented level of access to heretofore unobservable behaviors' (Kozinets, 2002: 63) and 'covert assistant researcher...who could observe behavior not readily visible to the facilitator' (Nagel et al, 2007: online) can easily hide behind the screen. Since the very reason for having ethical research guidelines, Internet or otherwise, is the protection of human rights, Institutional Review Boards and faculty ethical research committees are charged with the responsibility to carefully weigh the risks and benefits of such studies to prevent situations where the human rights of virtual participants are compromised in the name of research.

As Steinkuehler has noted, researchers must build and sustain a credible presence in the online group they study. 'The one piece of advice I would give people: If you're going to study these games, you damn well better be playing them' (McKee & Porter, 2009: 20; Steinkuehler interview). Not minding the language, this piece of advice was echoed by other online ethnographers as well. Kozinets talks about the importance of the initial 'Entrée' phase when the researcher familiarises her/ himself with the characteristics and the norms (netiquette) of the group (Kozinets, 2002: 63; Roberts et al, 2004).

Reflecting on the challenge of doing qualitative Internet research, Steinkuehler observes that '...making sense of such virtual worlds can be daunting. From data

collection through analysis, old issues arise in new form and new issues arise when least expected' (Steinkuehler, 2005: 98).

## **CONCLUSION**

In the introduction to the book chapter, Roberts et al state: 'Through this case study, we highlight the conduct of ethical research within virtual environments with the consent of the individuals and their community, without compromising their confidentiality, violating their assumptions of privacy or infringing upon their copyright entitlements' (Roberts et al, 2004: 157). In light of the ethical challenges discussed above, this is no small task. Yet it is exemplary studies such as these that form the backbone of qualitative Internet research.

The methods and ethics of qualitative Internet research have progressed steadily. While early researchers had to do without much guidance, the accounts of their experiences paved the way for others to come. The special issue of *The Information Society* journal of 1996, entitled 'A debate about the ethics of fair practices for collecting social science data in cyberspace' has had a great impact on the development of online research. In the late 1990s, the first ethical guidelines were developed by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) and the Association of Internet Researchers Ethics Working Group. Mann and Stewart published the first methodological text on Internet research in 2000 (Mann, C. & Stewart, F. (2000). *Internet communication and qualitative research: A handbook for researching online*). Since then the literature on the methods and ethics of qualitative Internet research has proliferated and courses on Internet research are offered at universities. The pioneers of 1990s, such as Amy Bruckman, are now the teachers of the new generation of qualitative Internet researchers.

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