

The problems of motivation and data quality in typed asynchronous online inquiries

Daniela Schiek¹ and Carsten G. Ullrich²

¹ Department of sociology, Bielefeld University, Germany. daniela.schiek@uni-bielefeld.de

² Department of education sciences, University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany. carsten.ullrich@uni-due.de

Abstract. Qualitative online inquiries are being increasingly used but they still lack methodological elaboration. This is especially true of asynchronous communications between absent communication partners with a time lag. What are the benefits and challenges of asynchronous online communication for qualitative data production? In this paper we discuss the problems of motivation and data quality in typed asynchronous online inquiries which depend on the physical absence of *alter* and *ego*. We try to suggest solutions to maintain the relationship with respondents despite them being able to interrupt it at any time and without warning. We also debate perspectives on the analysis of data which reach us without information on the situation in which they were formed.

Keywords: Online methods, written inquiry, respondents' motivation, data quality.

1 Introduction

The internet is increasingly seen as an empirical data resource by qualitative researchers. This is especially true of (multi-semiotic) ethnography (e. g. Dicks, Mason, Coffey & Atkinson, 2006; Williams, 2007; Beneito-Montagut, 2011). However, online communications have also been increasingly used for reactive forms of qualitative data collection since the mid-1990s, such as in the form of group discussions or dialogues via e-mail, web forums, chats and micro blogs. Nevertheless, the use of online media for qualitative interviews or group discussions has been barely studied yet (Jones & Woolley, 2015; Wilson, Kenny, & Dickson-Swift, 2015). This is particularly true of written asynchronous communication with a time lag and the absence of the communication partners, mostly realized via e-mail, web forums or micro postings on homepages or social media profiles. Typed asynchronous online communications constitute the maximal contrast with the face-to-face inquiries of qualitative research, which is the usual mode of qualitative data production. For this reason, they hold the highest potential for innovation in the field of online methods – they may become a particular method – but also the most unsolved problems, or rather challenges. For qualitative researchers, typed asynchronous online inquiries are almost virgin soil.

In this paper we discuss the potentials and challenges of written asynchronous online inquiries for qualitative research and the difficulties which currently exist in the use of such methods. The aim of the paper is to give an overview of the state of the discussion and to approach selected problems and their possible solutions. In particular, data quality, the participants' motivation despite the physical absence of the communication partners and the time lag are currently unsolved but also probably fruitful aspects.

2 The benefits of typed asynchronous online inquiries for qualitative research

Although synchronous online communication as in the form of chats or (video) phoning is also a specific means of communication due to its mediation (e.g. Heath & Luff, 1993), these typed or oral

chats are conceptually oral talks (Koch & Österreicher, 1994; Storrer, 2001; Dürscheid, 2003). One can assume that video, the telephone and synchronous text chats are selected in everyday life in order to compensate for the immediate physical absence of others and to bridge the corresponding distance. In contrast, e-mails, blogs, forums, etc. are selected just because of the distance from the communication partner. This distance, constituted by the absence of an immediate (physical) *alter* and the time lag in interaction, seems to enable specific actions by individuals. These written actions can overcome the immediate situation and provide permanence (Ehlich, 1980). Simmel (1983) already argued that in written correspondence deeply personal and immediate experiences (such as emotions) can be connected to the objective and permanent form of written language. Asynchronous written communication allows a manifest interconnection between the affective and the intellectual, because the physical absence of the communication partners, the time lag, and the multimodality of asynchronous written online communication enable individuals to 'research' and sort their experiences and intentions. The experience may not be available spontaneously and narratively, and not even verbally. As Hull and Nelson (2004: 253) point out, through hypertext the processing of meanings and their constitution by the mutual interplay of feelings, perceptions and interpretations can be partly organized and expressed processually. Therefore, the original conception of 'hypertext' (in microfilm and computer technology) targeted exactly this function of personal 'mind mapping': the storing of ideas and knowledge in all possible formats with links between them were for Vygotsky (1934/1986), Bush (1945) and Nelson (1991) a desirable system of structuring experience or knowledge, before or without placing it in pure texts. Especially on the internet 'HTML' (hypertext markup language) enables this to a far greater extent and far more comfortably than analogue systems and synchronous face-to-face communication methods.

Hence, for qualitative research, the 'mail survey' is particularly interesting when it is directed to processes of the constitution of meaning and experience. Typed asynchronous interaction opens up opportunities to study these processes at an earlier stage than is possible with synchronous and oral procedures – already when experiences are (still) not coagulated and ratified socially, before they are sorted, refined, discarded, reformulated, pointed, discussed with third parties or tried in interaction – and so when they are first constituted. Thus, qualitative research can come close to the limits of sociality and examine processes that lie between objectivity and immediate subjectivity, 'internal dialogue' and objective importance (Mead, 1973) or "between self-talk and public discourse" (Augustin, 2015). This is why typed asynchronous inquiries are predestined to be of use for sociological studies of 'unusual' experiences and actions at the limits of (prototypical) sociality, e. g. interactions with (becoming or dying) humans or amoral and risky statements (Schiek, 2014; Hirschauer & Hofmann, 2012).

Despite qualitative researchers having used written asynchronous online inquiries since the mid-1990s (e. g. Murray, 1997; Mann and Stewart, 2000; Rezabek, 2000; Hanna, 2001; Lijadi & Schalkwyk, 2015), they are largely unfamiliar with their concrete conduct. Because there are hardly any experiences or experimental empirical findings about the important variables in the data collection it is difficult to design reactive data collection using online communication. This is especially true of typed asynchronous inquiries. Even experiences with the time duration of data collection range from a few weeks to several months or years. This depends not only on the research question but also on the motivation of the respondents and the relationship work and active 'textual listening' by the interviewers. Both the motivation of the respondents and the active listening and relationship work is still a problem due to the researcher's reduced control of the field he 'enters' in written asynchronous online communication. Not only in the data collection but also in the data analysis, qualitative researchers have to respect their physical absence from the research environment, especially in cases of asynchronous inquiries. We discuss these problems in the following section and we also suggest some solutions.

3 The Problems of motivation and data quality in typed asynchronous online inquiries

3.1 How to motivate respondents in written communication and over time?

Qualitative researchers are familiar with relationship work in the research field. One can even say that they are experts at stimulating and regulating the flow of data, not only with the inquiry instrument itself but also with their appearance and interaction in the field. For respondents, it is very important and motivating to receive expressions of interest from interviewers, particularly in qualitative inquiries where the trend of the interaction and themes is open and narrations are very personal. However, in written inquiries inviting gestures and facial expressions are lacking and it is currently not clear how we can compensate for them in typed conversations. Furthermore, in asynchronous typed inquiries we need to increase the participation motivation of respondents (Jones & Woolley, 2015: 715). There are some elements of the 'active listening' in face-to-face-interactions which can be transferred to written forms of interaction, e.g. verbal expressions of interest and understanding of stories and statements. Gallagher (2015) presents textual forms of this. Interaction strategies from older mass media such as television or radio are also probably useful because they too have to maintain motivations and relationships in an uncontrollable interrupted interaction (respondents can "oversleep" the programme or switch off at any time). Hence, instruments are needed to bridge the distance and create intimacy, such as personal forms of address, but also additional communication through other channels, e.g. fan clubs, live meetings with actors or extending stories into the real life of the audience (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Horton & Strauss, 1957; Ayaß, 2005). For qualitative online inquiries, this means that we have to reduce the distance by using personal forms of address and employing more parallel channels in addition to the main conversation on the screen: maybe face-to-face meetings and permanent written backstage conversations ("textual presence") beyond the actual interview and its stage. Extra channels are also important for reasons of minimizing the strong intervention character that "written listening" would have in the actual interview. We hold that interviewers really need to simulate the quiet and soft gestural and facial regulation of data flow as lateral channels. They should not import all these strategies into the main conversation due to the disturbance that they create when they are written during the actual interviews: physical nodding is less interrupting than a written form of it and we have to find alternatives for it or rather develop techniques of "textual presence".

3.2 The status of data on our research desks

For the analysis of data collected in typed asynchronous online inquiries we need to consider that these data have a certain auditable status. The protocolled information on these data are not the immediate processes of thinking and categorizing but their effects in the form of a realized structure which was chosen from many possibilities (Endres, 2004: 40). Really analysing immediate thoughts, even though they are not expressed, is something we cannot do either in face-to-face interviews or with online procedures – even if we collect as much contextual knowledge as possible. However, it is true that in typed asynchronous online communications the researcher has reduced control over the research environment. We cannot know if the respondents deliberate, search for information etc. or finally how the data were ordered. But as sociologists we have to respect that even in face-to-face interaction it is an idealization to assume that we really 'see' and 'hear' if someone is authentic and credible. As Simmel (1983: 288) notes, it is part of the process of written interaction to deconstruct the "naive unity" of the different elements of understanding each other and make them analysable. This means that these data are not lacking something but are specific data with other rules and tech-

niques of expression and understanding. Also the research environment in typed asynchronous inquiries is not comparable with synchronous face-to-face forms of data collection. We probably have to redefine the situation, research fields and environment, e.g. as Knorr Cetina (2012) argues for the concept of 'synthetic' situations. Nevertheless, qualitative researchers have to respect these probably new definitions of research situations before and during their data analyses. Hence, adaptations and translations are needed instead of proceeding as usual.

4 Conclusions

The use of internet-based asynchronous communications in qualitative research can currently be improved, especially as there is much evidence that these communications allow specific actions and can make them empirically accessible. Due to the written form and multimodality and the absence of communication partners, qualitative researchers have the chance to study experience constitution earlier than with oral communication – namely when experiences are (still) at the limits of sociality, not (yet) socially validated or legitimized. Even through hypertext no experience can be examined beyond the boundaries of sociality – the interpretation of what the interviewee really 'thinks' is a (re)constructive work in face-to-face interviews as well as in typed asynchronous online inquiries. Nevertheless, qualitative research needs a specific definition of the virtual and asynchronous research field and environment. Therefore, it can be helpful to use studies of parasocial and synthetic interactions (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Horton & Strauss, 1957; Knorr Cetina 2012). However, further conversation analyses and empirical experiments are needed to identify and categorize the kind of interaction in typed asynchronous online communications, in both natural and the reactive research situations. This also regards the planning of the data collection and the arrangement of the relationship between respondents and researchers, or rather interviewers. Thus, we need to study the possibilities and functions of textual backchannels to compensate for physical listening and motivating. Both aspects, the definition of electronic research contexts and the development of textual qualitative interviewing, are very fruitful for methodological reflections and innovations.

References

- Ayaß, R. (2005). Interaktion ohne Gegenüber? In Jäckel, M. & Mai, M. (eds.), *Online-Vergesellschaftung? Mediensoziologische Perspektiven auf neue Kommunikationstechnologien*. Wiesbaden: VS., 34–49.
- Beneito-Montagut, R. (2011). Ethnography goes online: towards a user-centred methodology to research interpersonal communication on the internet. *Qualitative Research* 11(6):716-735.
- Bush, V. (1945). *As we may think*. Available at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1945/07/as-we-may-think/303881/>.
- Dicks, B., Mason, B., Coffey, A., & Atkinson P. (2006). *Qualitative Research and Hypermedia. Ethnography for the Digital Age*. Sage.
- Dürscheid, Ch. (2003). Medienkommunikation im Kontinuum von Mündlichkeit und Schriftlichkeit. Theoretische und empirische Probleme. *Zeitschrift für angewandte Linguistik* 38: 37–56.

- Ehlich, K. (1980). Schriftentwicklung als gesellschaftliches Problemlösen. *Zeitschrift für Semiotik* 2: 335–359.
- Endres, B.O. (2004). Ist Hypertext Text? In: Kleinberger, G. U. & Wagner, F. (eds), *Neue Medien – Neue Kompetenzen?* Frankfurt a.M.: Peter Lang, 33–48.
- Gallagher, J. (2015). Five Strategies Internet Writers Use to “Continue the Conversation”. *Written Communication* 32 (4): 396-425.
- Hanna, P. (2001). Using internet technologies (such as Skype) as a research medium: a research note. In: *Qualitative Research* 12 (2): 239–242.
- Heath, C. & Luff, P. (1993). Disembodied conduct. Interactional symmetries in video-mediated communication. In: Button, G. (ed.), *Technology in working order. Studies of work, interaction, and technology*. London: Routledge, 35–54.
- Hirschauer, S. & Hofmann, P. (2012). Schwangerschaftstagebücher. Produktionsbedingungen und Nutzungschancen eines Datentyps. In Soeffner, H.-G. (ed.), *Transnationale Vergesellschaftung. Verhandlungen des 35. Kongresses der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Soziologie*. Wiesbaden: VS, Verl. für Sozialwiss (CD ROM).
- Horton, D. & Wohl, R. (1956). Mass communication and para-social interaction: Observation on intimacy at a distance. *Psychiatry*, 19/3: 215-229.
- Horton, D. & Strauss, A. (1957). Interaction in audience-participation shows. *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 62, Nr. 6: 579-587.
- Hull, G.A. & Nelson, M.E. (2005). Locating the Semiotic Power of Multimodality. In: *Written Communication* 22 (22): 224–261.
- Jones, A. & Woolley, J. (2015). The email-diary: a promising research tool for the 21st century? *Qualitative Research* 15 (6): 705-721.
- Knorr Cetina, K. (2012): Die synthetische Situation. In: Ayaß, R. & Meyer, Christian (eds.), *Sozialität in Slow Motion. Theoretische und empirische Perspektiven*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften: 81–109.
- Koch, P. & Oesterreicher, W. (1994). Schriftlichkeit und Sprache. In Baurmann, J., Günther, H. & Ludwig, O. (ed.), *Schrift und Schriftlichkeit. Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch internationaler Forschung*. Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 587–603.
- Lijadi, A.A. & Van Schalkwyk, G.J. (2015). Online Facebook Focus Group Research of Hard-to-Reach Participants. In: *International Journal of Qualitative Research* 14 (5): 1–9.
- Mann, C. & Stewart, F. (2000). *Internet communication and qualitative research*. A handbook for researching online. Sage.
- Mead, G.H. (1973). *Geist, Identität und Gesellschaft*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.

- Murray, P.J. (1997). Using Virtual Focus Groups in Qualitative Research. *Qualitative Health Research* 7 (4): 542–549.
- Nelson, T.H. (1991). As we will think. In: Nyce, J. M. & Kahn, P. (eds.), *From Memex to Hypertext: Vannevar Bush and the Mind's Machine*. Boston: Academic Press, 245–260.
- Rezabek, R.J. (2000). Online Focus Groups: Electronic Discussions for Research. *Forum Qualitative Research* 1 (1). Available at: <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1128/2509>.
- Simmel, G. (1983). *Soziologie. Band III: Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung*. 6. ed. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- Storrer, A. (2001) Getippte Gespräche oder dialogische Texte? In: Lehr, A, Wiegand, H. E. (eds.), *Sprache im Alltag*. Beiträge zu neunten Perspektiven in der Linguistik. Berlin u. a.: de Gruyter, 439–465.
- Vygotsky, L. (1986). *Thought and language*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. (Original work published 1934)
- Williams, M. (2007). Avatar watching: participant observation in graphical online environments. *Qualitative Research* 7 (1): 5-24.
- Wilson, E., Kenny, A. & Dickson-Swift, V. (2015): Using Blogs as a Qualitative Health Research Tool. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 14 (5): 1-15.