

Qualitative ONLINE INTERVIEWS

SECOND EDITION



Janet Salmons



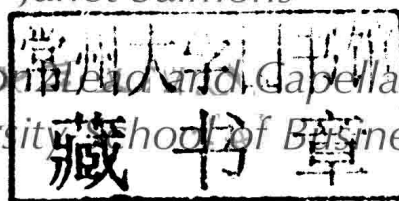
Qualitative Online Interviews

Strategies, Design, and Skills

Second Edition

Janet Salmons

Vision, Lead, and Capella
University School of Business



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Qualitative Online Interviews

Second Edition

Dedication

*To Hannah, Zac, Alex, Sammy, and Oliver—keep asking big questions;
you might grow up to be researchers!*

*To all my students and mentees—may you apply all you learn
to build new understandings and a better world.*

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Preface

The use of technology for personal and social, professional and commercial, civic and political communications has continued to grow since *Online Interviews in Real Time* was published in 2010. Through social media sites, blogs, and comment forums, people interact with others they know, with those they know only online, and with complete strangers they will never again encounter. The ease of online access to information in libraries and archives, as well as on websites and blogs, means we can readily find what we need to know—whether a scholarly article in a decades-old publication or a menu for a local restaurant. Internet access through mobile devices means that such communications and information retrieval has become ubiquitous—seamlessly woven into our everyday lives. For many of us, it is becoming harder to see a firm line between our online lives and our offline lives, and challenging to say whether one is more “real” than another.

In parallel to the evolution of information and communications technologies (ICTs) and their increased use, data collection methods for scholarly research are evolving. With readily available online communications tools, we can learn from and ask questions of diverse, global participants to collect data anywhere, anytime, using computers, phones, or mobile devices. We can find, generate, and use audio, visual, and written data to answer our research questions. We are on the cusp of a new era, with exciting new opportunities for qualitative e-researchers.

For the purpose of this book, the term *online interviews* refers to interviews conducted with ICTs. The primary focus is on interviews conducted synchronously or asynchronously with text messaging, video conferencing or video calls, web conference meeting spaces, or immersive virtual worlds or games. Researchers may also complement interview research with other data collected from observations, posts, or documents by or about participants or the phenomena.

Interview research is arguably the most personal form of data collection. The interviewer cannot simply stand back to observe subjects or analyze their survey responses. Whether the subject of inquiry is personal

or not, the interviewer must actively engage the interviewee, gaining personal trust and professional respect to elicit information-rich responses. Some level of relationship is inherent in the exchange, if only for the duration of the interview. When interviews occur online, researchers must devise and learn new ways to build trust and motivate individuals to contribute. Researchers also must devise and learn new ways to design studies, recruit participants, and meet ethical research guidelines.

I was—and am—intrigued by the potential for using verbal, visual, and textual elements to build researcher–participant rapport and to extend the usual question-and-answer verbal exchange that characterizes what we call an *interview*. The potential to rethink the *interview* expands with the availability of each new communications technology. As we consider and experiment with possible approaches, we need to rethink and reimagine our qualitative methods and move from “virtual” to “digital.” I am referring to Richard Rogers’s distinction between what he calls *virtual* approaches, those that import traditional data collection methods into the online milieu, and *digital* approaches that take advantage of the unique characteristics and capabilities of the Internet for research (Rogers, 2009, 2010). Rogers’s word choice may not be very descriptive, but the important concept is that emerging *digital* qualitative approaches require the researcher to do more than simply repurpose real-world data collection techniques. In *Qualitative Online Interviews*, I encourage you to look for ways to experiment and demonstrate the potential for meaningful new ways to collect data with interviews.

When options expand, typically the complexity of decision making increases as well. Why would a researcher choose to conduct an interview online rather than in person? What special considerations are needed for the design, the sample, and the analysis? What skills will the interviewer need? What online approach is most suitable for a particular research question? The terms *Internet studies* and *Internet research* have been used primarily to describe research that uses online methods to study behaviors and interactions that occur online (Consalvo & Ess, 2011; Markham, 2005). This book takes a broader view, suggesting that online methods are appropriate for studying behaviors that occur online *or* offline.

Two of my own online interview studies are described throughout the book. These research examples used a groupware meeting platform that allowed me to interview participants across the globe from my office in Boulder, Colorado. These dynamic experiences provided the impetus for the book. The online interview approach to data collection was convenient and low-cost, but those practical reasons are not what ignited my curiosity. Even for someone familiar with online communication, the online research process—from initial recruitment to final follow-up—far exceeded my expectations. The data I collected were categorically richer and deeper than I had anticipated.

Research is conducted to create new knowledge. We need new knowledge—theoretical and practical—that reflects the new realities of our digital age and connected, interdependent world. Online researchers

have the opportunity to model the process of global connection and make unique contributions. I hope that *Qualitative Online Interviews* will inspire you to be one of them!

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of *Qualitative Online Interviews* is to encourage researchers to extend the reach of their studies by using methods that defy geographic boundaries. *Qualitative Online Interviews* focuses on designing, conducting, and assessing research that relies on data from interviews and related observations, materials, or artifacts collected online. The emphasis is on the use of in-depth interviews in qualitative research, where relevant, mixed-methods designs are discussed. Whether used in its print or electronic format, this book is meant to be fringed with sticky notes, highlighted, and left open on the side of the desk (or desktop) for ongoing reference—not shelved after a single reading.

Qualitative Online Interviews encompasses the practical how-to information needed to make thoughtful decisions and the scholarly foundations needed to support them.

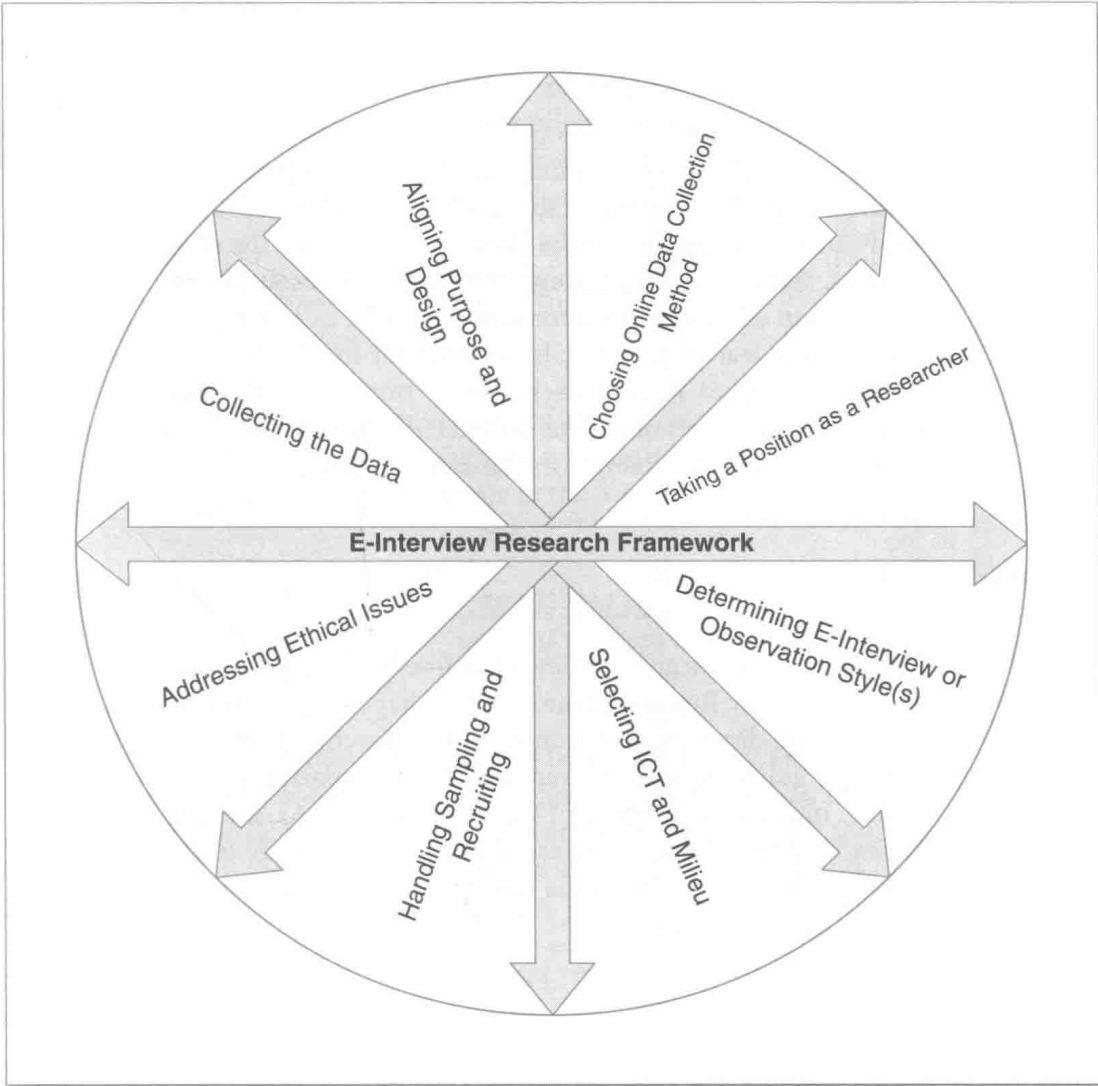
It is not enough simply to decide to use ICT tools or social media sites as places for exchange with research participants. Online communications vary not only from face-to-face communication but also from one another. An e-mail exchange is qualitatively different from a video call, and in research, those differences matter. *Qualitative Online Interviews* aims to provide the basis for assessing what matters to the research at hand to develop a credible, ethical study.

New Features in the Second Edition

The second edition updates *Online Interviews in Real Time* by doing the following:

- *Using the E-Interview Research Framework as the organizational structure for the book.* The E-Interview Research Framework was introduced in *Cases in Online Interview Research* (Salmons, 2012; see Figure 1). This conceptual framework offers a way to understand interrelationships across key elements of online interview research design and associated design decisions—and implications. The E-Interview Research Framework includes eight categories of questions and design considerations researchers need to think through when designing or evaluating a study with data generated through online interviews. Each category of the framework is covered in-depth in one or more chapters of *Qualitative Online Interviews*.

Figure 1 E-Interview Research Framework



Source: Vision2Lead Inc (2009–2015).

- *Broadening the options for online interviews.* While *Online Interviews in Real Time* focused exclusively on synchronous interviews, this edition considers a full range of synchronous, near-synchronous, and asynchronous options.
- *Adding suggestions for collecting data from online observations and collecting online documents.* Dispersed throughout the book is a discussion of how researchers can complement interviews by collecting data through participant or outsider observations, or by collecting posts or user-generated content, including written material, images or other media, artifacts, or documents.

- *Adding a chapter on e-interview research quality.* Whether as an instructor or editor, a peer student or peer reviewer, assessment of others' research is a part of the scholarly tradition. This chapter discusses emerging standards for quality in e-research and offers steps for using the E-Interview Research Framework as an evaluative tool.
- *Offering more resources on the companion book site.* The book site includes resources for researchers, students, and instructors. Materials include templates so you can adapt diagrams to map or illustrate your own study, links to examples, media clips, and cases from the author or credible sources. Syllabi and additional instructional resources are offered for inclusion in existing courses, or as the basis for a course, seminar, or workshop. These learning materials are relevant for use in research methods classes, as well as in social sciences or humanities courses that include research experiences or a focus on Internet studies. Updated resources will be added to address changes in this rapidly evolving field.

Organization of the Book

Chapter 1 provides an overview of online interview research and explains the E-Interview Research Framework. Chapters 2 through 8 each explore one specific dimension of e-interview research. Chapters 9 and 10 offer practical guidance to assist researchers in preparing for and conducting online interviews. Chapter 11 considers ways to use the E-Interview Research Framework to assess e-interview research quality. The book closes with a survey of trends that influence the further development of these emergent methods.

CHAPTER 1: THE E-INTERVIEW RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

In Chapter 1, you will learn about the E-Interview Research Framework. You will look at the options e-interview researchers have and the decisions they make, and explore how each decision influences the nature of the study and the research design.

CHAPTER 2: ALIGNING PURPOSE AND DESIGN

In Chapter 2, you will examine the need for alignment between epistemologies, theories, methodologies, and methods. You will focus specifically on the implications of the type of online interview for the research design.

CHAPTER 3: CHOOSING ONLINE DATA COLLECTION METHOD AND TAKING A POSITION AS A RESEARCHER

In Chapter 3, you will look at ways the motivation to use e-interviews influences other aspects of the research design, including sampling, recruiting, and selection of technology used in the interview. You will consider how the researcher's insider or outsider position influences the interview style, and the metaphors we use to explain the researcher's relationship to the study.

CHAPTER 4: DETERMINING E-INTERVIEW OR OBSERVATION STYLES

In Chapter 4, you will look at the use of structured, unstructured, and/or semistructured interview styles online. You will consider how interviewers decide what behaviors to observe as part of the interview.

CHAPTER 5: SELECTING INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGIES AND RESEARCH SETTING MILIEU

In Chapter 5, you will scrutinize distinctions between different kinds of synchronous, near-synchronous, and asynchronous communications that can be used for scholarly interviews. You will learn ways to align ICT features with the purpose of the study and the nature of the sample population.

CHAPTER 6: VISUAL RESEARCH AND THE ONLINE QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW

In Chapter 6, you will look at technologies that offer researchers and participants the opportunity to communicate using visual modes in online interviews. The Typology of Online Visual Interview Methods is introduced, with alternatives to use in text-based, video conferencing, online meeting spaces, or immersive virtual environments.

CHAPTER 7: HANDLING SAMPLING AND RECRUITING: SELECTING PARTICIPANTS FOR ONLINE INTERVIEWS

In Chapter 7, you will explore types of sampling and selection of research participants for online interviews. Building on prior chapters, this chapter addresses the implications of research purpose for sampling and participant selection.

CHAPTER 8: ADDRESSING ETHICAL ISSUES IN ONLINE INTERVIEW RESEARCH

In Chapter 8, you will delve into research design considerations for online interview research. You will survey ethical issues in online research and determine what ethical issues might need to be addressed depending on interview approach and public or private setting.

CHAPTER 9: PREPARING FOR AN ONLINE INTERVIEW

In Chapter 9, you will look at the preparation of interview questions or prompts, planning for use of communication tools in the interview, and the interviewer's preparation to listen to the research participant.

CHAPTER 10: CONDUCTING THE ONLINE INTERVIEW

In Chapter 10, you will delve into practical steps for carrying out an online interview. Four kinds of interviews are described using text-based, video conferencing, online meeting spaces, or immersive virtual environments. You also will look at steps for following up with interviewees to verify and complete the data collection.

CHAPTER 11: CONTRIBUTING QUALITY E-RESEARCH TO THE LITERATURE

Chapter 11 draws on the preceding chapters in a discussion of e-interview research quality and strategies for assessing proposals or completed studies.

CHAPTER 12: ONLINE COMMUNICATIONS AND ONLINE INTERVIEWS: TRENDS AND INFLUENCES

The book concludes with a discussion of trends in online communication that influence online interview options.

APPENDIX

The Appendix contains a glossary of terms and an overview of qualitative data analysis.

CHAPTER FEATURES

Some consistent features are offered in each chapter:

- *Research Tips* and *Ethics Tips* in the margins point readers to important practical reminders.
- *Key Concepts* summarize main ideas from each chapter.
- *Discussions and Assignments* may be used as the basis for formal or informal learning about online interview research.
- Other ancillary materials, including media pieces related to the topics of the book, are available on the book's companion website. Live hyperlinks will allow readers of the electronic version of this book to connect directly. This site is important to all readers who want access to up-to-date resources.

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