Edited by
Jason Hughes

SAGE Internet Research Methods

Volume I

SAGE Library of Research Methods

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SAGE INTERNET RESEARCH METHODS

VOLUME I

Core Issues, Debates and Controversies in Internet Research

藏书章

Edited by

Jason Hughes

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Jason Hughes is a Senior Lecturer in sociology, Brunel University. His first book, *Learning to Smoke* (University of Chicago Press, 2003) was the winner of the 2006 Norbert Elias prize. More recently, he has published on such topics as emotional intelligence, emotional labour, communities of practice, 'dirty work', moral panics, and 'figurational' sociology. He has recently completed, together with Eric Dunning, University of Leicester, a major study of the work of Norbert Elias entitled, *Norbert Elias and Modern Sociology: Interdependence, Knowledge, Power* (Bloomsbury, 2012). His research interests relate to four central, overlapping, areas: organisational/industrial sociology; the sociology of emotions; the sociology of the body and health; and sociological theory. He has previously published on the topic of Internet research methods, and has over 15 years experience of teaching and researching online.

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Editor's Introduction: Internet Research Methods

Jason Hughes

Historically, social researchers have consistently shown a willingness to exploit new technologies to enhance, facilitate and support their various activities. The use of early Computer Numerically Controlled (CNC) machines for survey data 'number crunching', and the later development and expansion of quantitative and then qualitative data analysis software in the 1980s and 1990s, are among the most notable examples in this respect (Lee *et al.* 2008: 4). In addition, the development and growing availability of new technologies appears to be related to certain key trends within social research. For example, the increasingly widespread availability of audio recording technology has been shown to be linked in a number of important respects with the ascendancy of depth interviewing as a method for social analysis (Lee 2004).

However, arguably no other technological development has influenced the landscape of social research as rapidly and fundamentally as the ascendancy of the internet.[1] Within the space of two decades, academics from across a range of fields and disciplines have come to exploit the technological affordances of this new medium. In addition to exploring the possibilities of conducting conventional survey-based and ethnographic research *via* new media, researchers have also developed a range of novel techniques specifically attuned to the distinctive characteristics and potentialities of the online world. These changes are such that any major introductory work on social research methods today would be considered incomplete without at least a section covering 'online' or 'virtual' research methods.[2] Indeed, herein, lies an important set of concerns pertaining to the terminology surrounding internet research.

The terminology in this field is anything but a settled matter. As an illustrative example, a book search for 'internet research methods' within the online retail site Amazon[3] produces results on topics such as uncovering family history; researching new media; and numerous titles on 'internet

skills'. In the latter case, the titles are typically concerned with effective techniques and strategies for searching the World Wide Web, with subsections devoted to such topics as 'the world of hyperlinks', 'evaluating websites', 'finding and using databases', 'effective Boolean searches', etc. (see, for example, Shaw 2007; Friedman 2004). A search for 'online research' generates similar results, but with a higher proportion of texts devoted to internet-based social and market research, typically covering such topics as internet surveys, online focus groups, web-based interviewing, and so forth (for instance, Jones 1999; Fielding *et al.* 2008). There are also a range of texts that signal the ascendancy of the internet as an emergent social sphere – a place to be researched in and of itself – principal among these are those with titles prefixed by the term 'virtual'. Searches for 'virtual research' tend to generate lists of manuscripts which cover topics relating to what we might call 'research into online worlds' – an enterprise which has spurned the development of the new field of 'internet ethnography' neatly captured in neologisms such as 'virtual ethnography' (see Hine 2000), 'digital ethnography' (see Murthy 2008), and 'netnography' (see Kozinets 2009). There is one further set of publications thrown up by these searches which can be grouped around the more general field of 'e-research'. 'E-research' (discussed in greater depth below) is typically research which exploits the large-scale distance collaboration potentialities of the internet to enable new modalities of 'networked scholarship' and 'big science' (see, for example, Jankowski 2009).

While these searches produce material which is in important respects non-representative and skewed by virtue of its inclusion within Amazon's list, they nonetheless serve here to introduce a number of key ways of thinking about the internet in relation to research. Centrally, these include: the internet as a *resource* for research; the internet as a *medium* for research; and the internet as an empirical *site* for research. In order to get a clearer sense of the overarching issues pertaining to this field, it is worth considering each of these in turn with the proviso that these distinctions invariably overlap, and are thus employed largely for heuristic purposes.

The Internet as a Resource for Research

The first of these possibilities – *the internet as a resource for research* – concerns the increasing range of resources available to researchers 'from' the internet. These range from bibliographic resources, search engines, databases, secondary data sources, statistical data sets, and various other forms of online archive and data repository, through to the new forms of data that can be 'mined' using techniques such as web sphere analysis, click-tracking, and web traffic monitoring. The increasing availability of online resources within and beyond the academy has, indeed, facilitated a significant increase in

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