

## QUESTION TWO

### **How can researchers make sense of the issues involved in collecting and interpreting online and offline data?**

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**Responding Essays by Maria Bakardjieva (p. xx) and Radhika Gajjala (p. xx)**

Before addressing the question that is the subject of this chapter, I want to introduce two working definitions: “qualitative internet research” and “online and offline data,” which, without being in any way prescriptive, reflect my personal understanding of these concepts. This understanding has been significantly influenced by my own research experience. Following a brief discussion of these concepts, I move on to explain why I think consideration of online and offline data is important in thinking through our research projects. Next, I explore critical junctures in the research process when these issues might arise and become a problem. I put forward possible justifications for doing research that combines online and offline data. I also discuss the implications of deciding not to obtain and analyze offline and online data, but to rely on one kind of data only. The paper concludes with some thoughts about the question of online and offline data in future qualitative internet research, in light of current technological trends which are increasingly blurring the line between online and offline communication, and recent debates about the nature of the research field site in internet studies.

## **Working definitions**

### *Qualitative internet research*

Departing from the definition of qualitative research as that which uses the internet to facilitate data collection or data analysis, we can define it as a qualitative inquiry into internet phenomena (Markham, 2003). More specifically, by the term “qualitative internet research” I refer to the study of the multiple meanings and experiences that emerge around the internet in a particular context. These meanings and experiences can relate to contexts of use (by individuals, organizations, networks etc.), and/or to contexts of design and production processes. The task of a researcher involved in a qualitative internet research project is to inquire into those meanings and experiences and explore their significance.

The question underlying a qualitative internet research project would be: what does “the internet” stand for in a particular context, for particular agents? Clearly, “the internet” is not a monolithic thing. Part of any qualitative exploration would have to be articulating what research arenas “the internet” comprises, and how they shape, as well as being shaped by, participants’ and producers’ experiences of use. For example, my study *Storytelling Online: Talking Breast Cancer on the Internet* (Orgad, 2005) began by mapping the landscape of breast cancer patients’ online communication, a process of describing the kinds of online spaces and environments in which participants engage. This ‘landscape’ defined the arenas of focus for the research, which included cancer-related message boards, personal diaries, and e-mail.

Equally, ‘qualitative’ does not map onto one single thing. While I acknowledge the difficulty, if not impossibility, to reach a clear definition of ‘online qualitative research’ (see also Denzin, 2004), my own perspective leans towards the interpretative as opposed to the more positivist and naturalistic conception of human experience and its analysis. More specifically, ‘qualitative’ to me implies a commitment to an interpretive understanding of people’s experiences of the internet, and of the texts (in the broad sense) they create online and offline. Crucially, as Denzin (2004, p. 7) usefully points out, “online interpretative work provide(s) the foundations for social criticism and social action.” For instance, in my own study a qualitative approach meant not just documenting and describing patients’ practices of telling their personal stories online – though this was a substantial part of the work – but fundamentally also thinking about these practices critically: whether, how and to what extent women’s storytelling online transform their experiences and the cultural and social environments in which their experiences are embedded.

#### *Online data and offline data*

To investigate the above question and inquire into a specific internet phenomenon, as with any research, the researcher must obtain data. The data can be obtained from two main types of sources: online and offline. They can include *texts* such as online postings and textual elements such as threads or links, face-to-face interview accounts, or ethnographers’ field notes, *images* such as pictures from websites or photos of spaces that are related to users’ experience of the internet, and *sound*, for example online clips. In short, ‘data’ refers to all the information derived from employing qualitative research

procedures. *Online data* are materials obtained using what have been often described as virtual methodologies: methods implemented by and through the internet. These include, for instance, participant observation in online spaces (such as the early studies of MUDs or MOOs: See, for example, Baym's study of an online community of soap opera fans, 2000; Kendall's study of BlueSky, 2002; Schaap's online ethnography of a role-playing MUD called New Carthage, 2002). The ethnographic material that researchers reap from their online ethnography constitutes what I refer to here as "online data". Another example of online data is texts of interviews with research participants that are conducted online. Kivits (2005) is one of many researchers who have conducted interviews with internet users via e-mail, in this case specifically to explore their use of the internet for seeking health information. She analyzed the online data she obtained, namely the e-mail transcripts of the online interviews, to account for users' information seeking practices on the internet, and their sense-making of this information.

The other kind of data is obtained using methodologies in offline settings. Here, in order to study internet-related phenomena, the researcher employs methodological procedures in offline contexts, which generate *offline data*. For example, in studying the integration of the internet in the everyday lives of users, researchers such as Bakardjieva and Smith (2001), and Mackay (2005) conducted ethnographic visits to and interviews in the domestic settings of internet users. Influenced by studies of television audiences, studies of this kind are based on offline data that consist of users' accounts obtained through interviews, participant observation in users' households, and in the case of Mackay, users' diaries recording their media use.

### **Why is it important to consider the question of online/offline data in thinking through our research projects?**

A distinction between online and offline has never been made in research of older communication media. For instance, researchers do not discuss the use of television data versus offline data, or telephone data versus everyday data. More generally, beyond the methodological context, we do not tend to talk about the “television world” versus the “offline world”, or about “radio contexts” versus “offline contexts” in the same way as we refer to “online” and “offline” in relation to the internet. The distinction between the online and the offline, and consequently between online and offline data in the research context, is rooted in an interrelated distinction that has specifically characterized common thinking about the internet. Hine (2000) usefully describes this distinction as that between the view of the internet as a “cultural artifact” and as a “culture”.

On the one hand, the internet, like other communication media, has been seen as a medium. Researchers working within this premise have explored how it is used as a means of communication within our social lives. As with studies of other communication technologies, they have studied the internet within specific bounded social settings, for example, in the home. The focus therefore has been on offline contexts, and thus research has relied on *offline data*. On the other hand, the internet has been commonly viewed as a communicative social space in its own right. Unlike other media such as the television or the telephone, internet spaces have been often seen as distinct and separate from offline, or ‘real’ social life, encompassing relations and practices of their own. In research terms, this view established cyberspace as a plausible research field site (Hine, 2000) and advanced investigations of online social spaces independently of offline social relations. Such studies rested on the assumption that online sociality has an inherent cultural

coherence which is internally meaningful and understandable in its own terms (Slater, 2002). Consequently, study of these online contexts relied mainly, and often exclusively, on *online data*.

The distinction between the online and offline has been constitutive of the understanding of the internet, from the earliest days of internet research. Methodologically, the distinction has led to a large extent to a separation between the use of offline and online data. Large-scale surveys of internet use such as those conducted by Pew internet & American Life Project base their analyses of online life mainly on offline data such as information elicited by phone surveys or tracking surveys of internet activities (see for example Howard et. al., 2001). Other researchers, such as Bakardjieva and Smith (2001), though working from a different perspective in their study of internet use, also rely predominantly on offline data including interviews with domestic users, a tour of the computer and internet-related spaces in respondents' homes, and a group interview with respondents' family members.<sup>1</sup>

On the other side there have been numerous studies, especially in the early days of internet research, drawing exclusively on online data. For example, Donath's (1999) study of identity deception in an online community, Reid's (1999) exploration of social control in MUDs, and Danet, et. al's (1997) study of language use in computer media - all relied on analysis of online texts and interactions.

More recently, however, this separation is being increasingly deconstructed. It has become clear that the separation between the online and offline cannot be sustained. Researchers have consistently argued for the need to frame the online both in its own

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<sup>1</sup> As I mention later in the chapter, Bakardjieva and Smith's (2001) study included only one component of online data, which they describe as a tour of users' "computer space".

right, and in relation to other contexts and realities. This recognition clearly undermines, as Haythornthwaith and Wellman point out, the assumption “that only things that happen on the internet were relevant to understanding the internet” (2002, p. 5).

Recognition of the complex relationship between online and offline has profound methodological implications. In particular, two key questions arise at two critical junctures of the research, in relation to online and offline data. The first question arises at the stage of designing an empirical study: do we need offline data in order to make sense of online phenomena? Do we necessarily need offline information to be able to adequately account for these meanings and experiences? Or can we produce high quality, persuasive and grounded qualitative research of an internet-phenomenon that draws merely on online data? What claims can a study relying only on data retrieved online make? The opposite question is as intriguing: if the internet is treated as simply a means of communication that is used in an everyday social context, can it therefore be studied as such--that is, merely by using methodological procedures in offline contexts, without any online data?

The second key question arises at the stage of data analysis and concerns the interpretation of online and/or offline data: Are offline and online data comparable? Can they be integrated, and if so, how? If a decision has been made to rely on only online *or* offline data, researchers must confront questions regarding adequacy, validity and limitations in the analysis. This problem also arises, of course, for researchers who use *both* online and offline data.

I turn to the two questions in more detail below, discussing each in the context of the particular research junctures at which it may arise and highlighting possible ways of

tackling this question. Crucially, my intention is not to provide prescriptive answers, but rather to demonstrate what I regard as useful, sensible, ethical and context-sensitive approaches to these questions.

**Is obtaining offline and online data necessary? If so, when? If not, why?**

As mentioned earlier, the question of, and thus the decision about, whether it is necessary to obtain online and offline data arises at the very early stages of designing the empirical research. The answer to the question seems simple: “it depends on the question you ask and on the context you study.” However, in what follows I want to unpack this seemingly straightforward answer, by pointing to particular considerations that might be involved, and by grounding the discussion in specific examples from my own study and that of others.

In their study of young people’s cultural life and social resistance, Wilson and Atkinson (2005) ask: “What is the relationship between young people’s online (activist) activities and offline social action?” The emphasis in the question is on understanding this group’s culture and the ways online and offline contexts inform and enable each other. The theoretical concern over the relationship between online and offline contexts, in terms of a specific group’s activities and practices, informs a methodology that would aim at capturing the online, the offline and the connections between them. Thus, Wilson and Atkinson’s study was based on an analysis of the contents of twenty-eight webpages (online data), in-depth face-to-face interviews with website producers and organizers, fieldwork that involved attending events that were organized by the groups involved, and a study of the media coverage of the groups’ events (offline data).



Similarly, in my research into the online communication of women suffering from breast cancer (Orgad, 2005), obtaining both online and offline data regarding the participants' experiences was crucial for making sense of the meanings of online communication for women with breast cancer. Patients' online participation and their use of the internet are deeply embedded in their everyday experience of chronic illness. Therefore, if we are to understand patients' online contexts, we clearly have to have knowledge of their offline contexts, that is, of the everyday life aspects of their coping with breast cancer. By the same token, to make sense of patients' experience of breast cancer (offline), it is necessary to get to grips with their online engagement, which is a significant part of their experience of coping with their illness. So as early as at the stage of designing an empirical study I made a decision about the need to obtain online and offline data, on the basis of which I would build my analysis.

In both of these examples the decision to obtain online and offline data is situated in the context of the specific research goals. It might seem that it would always be more sensible and context-sensitive to seek access to both online and offline data. However, this is not necessarily the case. Eichhorn's (2001) study demonstrates how the researcher's decision to rely primarily on online data, and deliberately avoid the study of participants in their offline environments was an informed context-sensitive decision, stemming from a careful understanding of the phenomenon being studied. In her study of girls' textual online community ("zines"), carried out primarily online, it was unlikely that the tactics and practices that Eichhorn aimed to examine would have been rendered visible had she opted to study them within an offline environment, such as a school or a classroom.

More generally, Eichhorn (2001) challenges the assumption that ethnographic research of an online-based phenomenon has necessarily to be dependent on face-to-face relationships with the study's participants. She shows that in her work, participating in informants' everyday lives did not necessarily mean accessing their offline environments. On the contrary, Eichhorn insists that "understanding people's lives, particularly in the technologically driven Western world, may sometimes require ethnographers to do what the people they seek to study do, even if it necessitates staying at home" (p. 566).

A related argument against the use of offline data is that in seeking to combine online and offline data, particularly when the data relate to participants' lives and activities, researchers run the risk of implying that online data are not as authentic as offline data. That being said, employing procedures to study participants in their offline environments could be a fruitful way of contextualizing and adding authenticity to the findings obtained online (Hine, 2000). Turkle (1996), for example, in her notable study *Life on the Screen* reflects on the significance of conducting face-to-face in-depth interviews with her online informants, as a way to further "explore an individual's life history and tease out the roles technology has played" (p. 324). She goes so far as only to include findings on those online informants whom she also met in person, a methodological decision she justifies with her concern with the relationship between users' experiences in online reality and real life.

In my study, the transition from e-mail correspondence with my informants, to face-to-face meetings, proved extremely significant for understanding the experience of breast cancer patients' online engagement. I consider this transition to have been a key turning point in my understanding of the relationship between patients' lives and their

online experience. In hindsight, I realize that so long as I only had access to participants' construction of their online experience through their e-mail accounts, the relationship between patients' lives and their online experience seemed fairly palpable and straightforward. In most of the e-mail accounts I initially received from patients, "the internet" is described in a fairly idealized way: either as a "dazzling" and "empowering" "miracle" (reproducing popular emancipatory constructions of the internet) or in a reductive way, as being nothing but another source of information about cancer. The offline data which I obtained later through face-to-face interviews, revealed much more complex connections between patients' online and offline experiences. These accounts were primarily personal narratives about how they coped with their illness. Rather than foregrounding the experience of using the internet (as in the e-mail accounts), in the face-to-face accounts this experience was embedded in their stories.

The face-to-face interviews also enabled respondents to move away from utopian or dystopian discourses and clichés about "the internet". Instead, in their face-to-face accounts, "the internet" was usually disaggregated into its different components, in the particular contexts where it played a role in their coping. While in the e-mail accounts "the internet" appeared a pretty much singular "thing", the face-to-face interviewed revealed its various facets and situated contexts.

Even Eichhorn (2001), who persuasively explains why conducting research relationships online and offline is not always appropriate and does not necessarily fit the context and goals of the research, reflects on the invaluable significance of the only face-to-face meeting she had with one of the participants of the online community she studied. She describes this meeting as an important turning point in her understanding of this

community, and as presenting an opportunity to ask questions she had previously failed to recognize as being relevant to her research (p. 571).

Crucially however, in all the examples I have mentioned, the researchers do not treat the offline data on participants' lives and experiences as more "truthful" or "authentic" than the data obtained online. Rather than validating the veracity of the data obtained online, the rationale for deciding to gather offline data is based in a perceived need to add context, to enhance information, and to yield insights into aspects that would otherwise remain invisible, but which may be consequential to the research. More generally, rather than being led by some general rules of inquiry, what guided the researchers in the above examples were the particular research contexts and the demands of their research goals.

The question of whether there is a need to enhance online data with offline data can arise at later stages of the research project. Rutter and Smith (2005), for instance, sought to discover how sociability is discursively constructed in the "RumCom" newsgroup online. The major component of data used in their study was the messages that were published on this online space. However, this kind of data did not seem on its own to be sufficient. "We also wanted to add some depth beyond what we could discover through the analysis of messages. We felt that our online ethnography had to do more than merely observe and collect textual data" (p. 87). They therefore complemented the online data they had initially obtained, by a series of phone and face-to-face interviews with some of their online informants. This offline data allowed them to inquire into the ways in which online participants became involved in the RumCom newsgroup and what

they got out of it, information that had remained obscure as long as they obtained only online data.

I have so far discussed the relationship between online and offline data only in one direction, that is, as the research moves from online to offline. One can, however, picture a research situation that starts offline, and then moves to obtaining online data. The rationale for such a move might be similar to what I described in relation to the move in the opposite direction: the need to add depth to the phenomenon being studied, contextualize and enhance the offline data.

Bakardjieva and Smith (2001) designed a quasi-ethnographic study that aimed to explore computer networking from the standpoint of the domestic user. They sought to devise a methodology that would allow them to investigate “both the real-life contexts and actions of our [their] subjects *and* their exploits in cyberspace” (p. 69). Influenced by studies of the domestication of media and technology in people’s everyday lives, the researchers deliberately focused on the offline environment of users’ homes, as the sites in which they studied domestic practices of internet use. The offline data they obtained included interviews with domestic users, a tour of the computer and internet-related spaces in respondents’ homes, and a group interview with respondents’ family members. These data were complemented by one component of online data, which they describe as a tour of users’ “computer space”, that is, the traces of internet use that were saved in respondents’ computers, or in their accounts on the provider’s server (p. 70). Arguably, a more elaborate use of online data, such as, for example, the ethnography of the actual Internet spaces in which these users participated, could have further augmented the

researchers' understanding of the ways in which the Internet is integrated into users' everyday life situations, and tied in to specific social–biographical situations.

In this context, Sanders' (2005) research is quite illuminating, as it uses a multi-layered research design, consisting of both online and offline components. In studying the sex work community in Britain, Sanders started her ethnography offline, observing indoor sex markets and street prostitution for ten months. She later found it necessary to explore the impact of CMC on the organization of sex economies, to which end she turned to the Internet to collect online data, mainly through instances of lurking. Observing forums such as message boards and live chat sessions where sex workers and clients interact (textually) gave Sanders insights into how commercial sex was advertised, discussed, selected and negotiated online between clients, sex workers and owners of establishments. The researcher then realized that in order to fully understand the role of the internet in sustaining the identities of sex workers, she needed to move back offline: to recruit online participants for face-to-face interviews. “In the same way that sex workers and clients inevitably transfer their relationship from online to real encounters”, she reflects, “questions relating risks and management strategies led me to move beyond the screen to face-to-face relationships” (p.71).

Sanders' study reveals other important considerations that need to be taken into account when making decisions about the use of online and offline data, particularly when the latter involves moving relationship with participants from online to offline, and even more particularly when sensitive or high-risk groups are concerned. The nature of these considerations can be ethical, involving questions of the researcher's trustworthiness and rapport with her informants. One of the lessons Sanders and other

researchers (e.g. Kendall, 2002; Mann and Stewart, 2000; Orgad, 2005) learned, is that it is highly problematic, if not impossible, to move from online to offline with informants without establishing *bona fide* status, trust and rapport. Obtaining offline information on online participants could also simply prove infeasible, particularly where hard-to-reach populations, such as sex workers, are concerned.

Another aspect that the researcher has to consider is the sample of respondents. As long as we rely on online methodologies our access is limited only to those who actively participate (e.g. who post messages), and therefore are visible. However, there are many online participants who are only lurkers, but whose participation and practices can be extremely significant and highly consequential for understanding an internet-related context. Yet from a discursive point of view, the “silent” are difficult to incorporate into the analysis, as they leave no observable traces (Hine, 2000, p. 25).

Let me give an example from my study of breast cancer patients’ online communication. A breast cancer patient writes to her fellow-sufferers’ mailing list:

[I]f you want to...post as much as you want...even a lot in one day. If you want to, stay silent and get support without posting. If you want to, stay away for a while and come back. We have some members who come and go. AND wow, some of our members "graduate" and feel they are not in need of support ...if those members want to come back...they are always welcome.

Staying in the background--only reading messages, as the patient cited above describes it, can play a significant role in how patients cope with their illness. Lurking enables patients to learn about others’ experiences, to relate their own situation to that of others, without having to necessarily expose themselves and their feelings. Similarly, another

patient reflects on the valuable therapeutic effect of putting her experience into text by typing it – before actually interacting online:

Probably the best part of the internet is that you need to type your question or feeling before you can share it and sometimes just writing it down is a therapy of its own.<sup>2</sup>

To be able to inquire into these highly meaningful practices, such as lurking, or simply typing out one's experience (without necessarily publishing it online), I had to go beyond the screen, that is, to gain access to those participants and their activities, which would have otherwise remained invisible. Relying only on the observable representational level of online activities (i.e. texts) was not sufficient on its own to explain the significance and capture the complexity of these activities.

But how do you do this? How do you access the invisible? To tackle this, I recruited some interviewees by snowballing offline. I exploited initial contacts with women whom I met online in order to recruit their acquaintances as interviewees who participated online, but not necessarily actively and visibly. This enabled access to an appropriate range of participants engaged in different levels of involvement, in different kinds of online activities in relation to their illness.

Researchers may also be interested in studying those who are not online, those who “fail” or refuse to engage online. This can be an interesting phenomenon to study in itself (and speaks to some of the boundary discussions in the previous chapter of this volume). It can also shed light on the study of internet use and online participation. For example, in my study one of the interviewees was a patient who initially visited breast cancer

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<sup>2</sup> An extract from an e-mail account of one of my research participants.



patients' forums, however after a short time became very critical of these sites and stopped participating in them. Nor did she reply to my online request for women willing to participate in the study. "You would have never found me online", she told me in our face-to-face interview. Indeed, I recruited her through snowballing (another patient referred me to her), rather than online, as I did with the majority of the interviewees.

Though my research focused on the experience of women who participated online in the context of their illness, rather than non-participants, the experience of this woman and other non-users I met proved invaluable. They illuminated some of the significant constraints of the spaces in which patients were actively participating and helped me think critically about the phenomenon I studied: to what extent are these online spaces inclusive, allowing 'people from all walks of life' (as one forum describes its mission) to share their experience?

Clearly, if we wish to study those who are not online, relying on online data is not sufficient. We need to gain access to informants' offline contexts and retrieve offline data. Indeed, driven primarily by the digital divide agenda, researchers have recently recognized that studying those who are not online can be a significant aspect of understanding internet phenomena (e.g. Lenhart, 2001, based on a telephone survey). I suggest that exploring participants who are excluded from certain CMC contexts, or have "failed" to engage in CMC, can be very fruitful for qualitative studies of internet phenomena, and not just in relation to the digital divide. For instance, two of my interviewees, despite having the technical capacity and competence for engaging in CMC, found the breast cancer internet sites they encountered inappropriate and unsatisfactory. Their experience of rejecting the internet as a communicative space in

coping with their illness was extremely telling – not only in terms of the specificity of their experience, but also in terms of the light it threw on the majority of the “successful” cases. These two patients were looking for a forum that would allow a critical and rational discussion on breast cancer whereas the majority of the forums they found online focused on patients’ emotional and confessional stories. This distinction helped me understand the centrality of the subjective, experiential and confessional discourse that governs many patients’ internet spaces, and in particular the significance of storytelling as a key social activity in which breast cancer patients engage online (see Orgad, 2005).

Whereas I started online, and then moved offline with my research participants, Eichhorn (2001) decided to locate her research almost exclusively in an online site, relying primarily on online data. Situating her research online, rather than in an offline setting such as school or classroom, enabled her to examine a group of young women not always visible in the school system. As she reflects:

Significantly, many of these young women wrote about feeling either invisible or even at risk in the school environment...In contrast with the lack of visibility many of these young women experienced in their schools, the textual community of ‘zines was a space in which these young women, many not ‘out’ in their local communities, could have their identities and experiences recognized and validated” (p. 574).

Eichhorn’s decision to locate her research in an online site, relying primarily on online data, opened up the possibility of studying “this often unaccounted for group of young people” (Eichhorn, 2001, p. 574). Whatever decision is made, the crucial point is that it

should be sensitive to the context being studied, and situated within the demands of the research question.

### **How to use and analyze online and offline data?**

The other critical juncture at which the issue of online and offline data arises is the stage of analysis and interpretation of the data. How to integrate the two sets of data? Do they correspond? Are the two sets of data comparable, and if so, how?

Such questions become an issue particularly if the rationale for obtaining online and offline data was to break down the online/offline distinction conceptually. In regarding the data as two sets of distinctively different and separate data, we run the risk of reproducing the very idea that we aimed to challenge, that is, that the online and the offline are two separate distinguished realms.

An attempt to break down the distinction between online and offline cannot be pursued only in theory; it is a project substantially implicated in methodology, and in this context, particularly in the way the data are treated. In what follows I will try to demonstrate some of the implications of adopting this rule of thumb, in reflecting upon the data analysis in my research on breast cancer patients' online communication.

My data analysis involved three different types of texts: (1) e-mail accounts; (2) online texts from breast cancer websites; and (3) face-to-face interviews. Crucially, no hierarchy was implied among the different texts; the three types were treated equally in terms of their contribution to the data analysis. In addition, rather than organizing the analytical discussion by kinds of data, and the information elicited from each, I organized it by three thematic dimensions that characterized what I described as participants'

“storytelling online”. The different kinds of data (twelve face-to-face interviews, twenty-eight e-mail accounts and one letter, and various texts from breast cancer websites) were coded according to the three dimensions.

When analyzing the data, the aim was to identify participants’ understandings of their online experience in relation to each of the three thematic categories. I looked for the different manifestations, as well as absences of each of the three aspects in patients’ accounts (e-mail and face-to-face) and in texts on breast cancer websites (e.g. a website’s instructions for how to post a message). In reading the various texts, I asked myself: what do they say is significant about the exchanges? What do they emphasize and what do they omit or understate? What is surprising about what they say about their online interactions? What is problematic? In light of these questions, I examined differences and similarities between the different sets of data, and tried to make sense of them.

I used discourse analysis of the website texts to contextualize patients’ accounts (both e-mail and face-to-face) of their illness and online experience, and vice versa: patients’ accounts of their illness experience and internet use were used to make sense of breast cancer websites’ texts. For example, a common feature of the face-to-face interviews was that participants understated or even denied their participation in exchanging personal stories online, whereas examination of their e-mail accounts and observation of the websites they visited showed that, often they were quite actively engaged. Also, the face-to-face and e-mail accounts were produced for me, the researcher: they were the stories of these patients’ online experience in relation to their illness. The online texts taken from breast cancer websites, on the other hand, were stories about the experience of illness, and coping with it, produced by patients and

posted for their online fellow-sufferers. The significantly different audiences had crucial implications for the content and form of these texts, an issue I took up in analyzing the data.

Another difference between the data obtained online and that gleaned from face-to-face interviews derived from their timing: the online accounts women posted on websites were often created when they were going through the illness and undergoing treatment. The e-mail accounts they wrote for me were often still temporally close to their actual experience (since I recruited interviewees from the websites where they posted their stories, usually close to the time of posting). The face-to-face interviews, however, were mostly conducted at least a year later than this. Naturally, women often had a very different perspective of their experience of illness and, inextricably, of internet use. For all those reasons, it appeared crucial to integrate the different kinds of accounts and perspectives from the different sets of data into an understanding of the communicative context that I studied.

Fundamentally, in reading and analyzing women's accounts, my aim was not to evaluate whether they were 'truthful' or not. Rather, the aim was to get enhanced understanding of women's experiences of using the internet in relation to their illness. So, for example, a woman told me in a face-to-face interview that the internet played a very limited role, if any, in her experience of coping with breast cancer. However, this was contradicted by the online data I gathered, which included her various postings and revealed her rather active participation. There was also an online account she wrote me two years earlier in reply to the recruitment message I posted on one of the breast cancer boards, in which she recounted her use of the internet and its significance as a tool for

information seeking and a space for support. How do you reconcile such differences between the same person's accounts? The principle that guided me is rooted in the interpretative approach to life stories (Plummer, 2001): all autobiographical memory is true. When people talk about their lives they inevitably forget, select, exaggerate, become confused and sometimes lie. It is the interpreter's task to identify these gaps and discern their meaning. My interpretation of the case cited above was that the face-to-face interview, which took place a year after this woman was already cured, was part of her attempt to construct herself as a healthy person. She associated her online participation in breast cancer forums with her illness, a chapter she wanted to forget and put behind. She therefore tended to marginalize and almost dismiss the significance of this chapter, and the internet's part in it, in her life.<sup>3</sup>

The more general point I wish to draw from this example is that in their analysis, researchers should try to use the different kinds of data as mutually contextualizing each other. There is a tendency, as Slater (2002) observes, to treat the offline "as that which makes sense of, or explains, the online" (p. 544). However, the offline does not explain the online, nor does the online explain the offline. Therefore, greater advantage is gained when examining the ways in which each configures the other.

Yet it can be argued that a qualitative research project could aim at comparing online and offline manifestations of a certain context. In this case, to fit the method and the analysis to the research question, it appears most sensible to treat the online and offline data in a comparative fashion, analyzing one against the other. Early CMC research focusing on the 'cues-filtered-out' approach employed experimental studies of

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<sup>3</sup> Marginalizing the role the internet played in coping with the illness was a recurring phenomenon in women's accounts. When asked to reflect on the place of the internet in the experience of their illness, interviewees often depicted their online experience as insignificant.

small groups to compare face-to-face and computer-mediated group behavior (for a review of these see Baym, 2002). Discourse and linguistic analysis have often been used to compare CMC discourses and offline discourses, oral or written (e.g. Baron, 2003). The assumption underlying these comparisons has often been that CMC is a constrained version of face-to-face embodied interaction. However, this is highly problematic view. Theoretically, it fails to recognize CMC's unique and varied qualities, understanding how users draw on their existing communicative capabilities to construct social meaning within the challenges and the opportunities posed by the online medium Baym (2002, p. 66). Consequently, an analysis which takes the face-to-face as its starting point is unable to explain the specificity of the online phenomenon it aims to study; it can explain what is going online only in terms of face-to-face qualities.

Normatively, regarding online communication as a constrained version of face-to-face communication implies that online communication is 'less' than face-to-face communication: less authentic, less 'real', less close, and less truthful. Methodologically, treating the online as a constrained version of the offline limits the tools and practices that researchers use to those that they can apply to the offline. It does not allow researchers to develop methods that are sensitive and specific to what happens online. In my study, for example, if I were guided by a need to compare the online to the offline I would have probably been unable to analyze and account for the significance of discursive forms such as threads – which do not have straightforward face-to-face parallels.

This is not to say that comparing online and offline data cannot yield interesting and important observations about the qualities of CMC. However, one needs to carefully

account for the underlying theoretical and conceptual framework that invites such comparative treatment of the data in the first place.

Whether online and offline data are used in the analysis in an integrative fashion, or in a comparative way, a key thing to be wary of is making judgments about the authenticity of the data. There is often a tendency to imply, explicitly or implicitly, that the information the researcher garnered from online sources (e.g. websites, CMC interactions) is not as authentic as that generated from offline ones. In treating online and offline data, we should be informed by recognition of the distinct character of online and offline contexts and interactions, and of their consequent texts, while at the same time accounting for the inextricable connections, similarities and continuities between the two.

### **How to present our interpretations?**

Lastly, an important issue of concern in the construction of our analysis is the presentation of the data. Do we differentiate online from offline data, or do we present it as a coherent set of data? This may seem a technical and rather marginal aspect, but it constitutes a significant feature of the treatment of data. In reporting my study, I used different fonts to reflect the different sources from which I was quoting: (1) academic or any other published text which is not a direct part of the ethnographic material; (2) extracts from face-to-face interviews used to build my analysis; and (3) extracts from online texts, whether e-mail accounts from participants or texts posted in public online forums. I was challenged by one reader whose criticism was that in identifying the different online and offline sources by different fonts I was not acting in line with what I was advocating; i.e. that the online and the offline should be seen and treated as



significantly separate rather than interwoven. While I do not think that either point of view is right or wrong, I do think that whatever decision researchers make about differentiation, they should be reflexive of its possible implications. In my case, my decision to use different fonts was made to help the reader identify the different sources of the quotes (especially given the prevalence of quotes in my analysis). In so doing, my intention was certainly not to imply that the online and the offline should be or were being treated as two separate or isolated realms (see also Markham, 2004 for further discussion of issues of presentation).

Our responsibility to reflexively interrogate our methods carries through all stages of research design, analysis, interpretation and presentation of findings. This applies whether researchers are relying on offline data, online data, or both.

Pitts (2004), for example, demonstrates a level of reflexivity in her study of personal web pages of women with breast cancer. Unlike my study, Pitts analyzed only online data, namely the texts of fifty personal web sites of individual breast cancer survivors. In presenting her analysis of these data she reflects upon their limits:

I can make no claims about the off-line identities of the authors who wrote the web sites, and I do not assume that cybersubjects' on-line identities are necessarily identical to their off-line identities...

I operate under the assumption that the web pages are in some sense 'truthful', in that their authors do indeed have breast cancer or know someone with breast cancer...

That this assumption is not empirically verified must be considered a limitation of this research (p. 40).

While researchers should be encouraged to reflexively interrogate their methods and analyses, I think that Pitts actually falls into the trap that I discussed earlier, that is, of treating online data as less authentic or truthful than offline data. Pitts seems to work with some absolute notion of offline data as inherently more “truthful” or “verified” than online data, and hence to judge the online data upon which she bases her analysis as limited and probably less authentic than their offline counterparts. Rather, standards of authenticity should be seen as situationally negotiated and sustained (Hine, 2000). In this sense, Pitts’s later reflection on her decision not to look for offline data on her informants seems more context-sensitive and sensible. It demonstrates an understanding of the perceptions of her informants and the judgments *they* make about the online spaces in which they participate:

I believe that this would go against the spirit of personal web pages, which are intended to be public but also to afford varying levels of anonymity and a choice about making personal disclosures, such as one’s real name, location, appearance and so on, to readers (p. 41).

In short, whether the analysis is based on both online and offline data, or only one kind of data, the question of the authenticity, validity and adequacy of the analysis is one that the researcher has to face, critically and reflexively.

### **Conclusions: Revisiting the online/offline distinction**

The key argument in this chapter is that in thinking through their own research projects or evaluating others’, researchers need to critically consider the data that they obtain and interpret. It is not enough to recognize the complex nature of the relationship between the

online and the offline at a conceptual level, while ignoring its methodological implications. I find it striking that researchers make claims about the immersion of users' experiences and practices in their everyday lives, while the data they rely upon provide them with very limited grounds to adequately understand the relationship between their participants' online and offline worlds. This does not, as I have stressed, mean that it is only through offline data that researchers can make sense of respondents' everyday lives. The key point is that the data on which researchers build their analyses, whether these are online, offline, or both, should be high quality. The data should be collected and generated after solid preparation based on a clear rationale; should fit with the question and the context; should convincingly support the claims being made; should be used reflexively and be context sensitive, and finally, should be ethically grounded.

Throughout the course of the research project, researchers must ask themselves such questions as: does obtaining online and offline data fit the questions I'm asking and the context I'm studying? Would offline data reveal something significant about the context being studied that could not be obtained from online data? In what ways might the offline data enhance the interpretation of the online data?

It must also be borne in mind, as I have argued, that combining online and offline data is not always an appropriate decision. It might be insensitive to the context being studied, it might involve problematic ethical consequences, or it might simply be impractical. Thus, an equally important set of questions includes: can I make a persuasive case with only one of the two kinds of data? What might possibly be lost or risked in obtaining the two kinds of data? Moving research relationships from online to offline

and, more generally pursuing offline data to complement online data, can certainly open up research paths, but could equally be counterproductive and close off research routes.

Perhaps we should revisit the distinction between online and offline data, and reconsider its usefulness.<sup>4</sup> As the space of media and communication becomes more hybrid, and with the increasing trend towards the convergence of technology, the lines between online and offline communication are blurring (Herring, 2004; Orgad, 2007). The term “online” itself does not map consistently into a single media technology. The mediascape becomes more hybrid and multi-layered, and “virtuality” is not restricted to being online, but can embrace and link several media including what we would once have considered as “offline media,” for instance the telephone. Furthermore, traditional modes of CMC are increasingly being used in order to establish face-to-face contacts (Herring, 2004).

These changes challenge the methodological distinction between online and offline data, with which I opened this chapter, in significant ways. What are the implications for our research and our analysis, as the data become even messier and less stable? This line of questioning connects to a recent discussion on the need to move beyond the concept of place-bounded ethnography, and redefine the field and its boundaries (Eichhorn, 2001; Hine, 2000; Leander and McKim, 2003). Influenced by ideas such as Marcus’s (1995) “multi-sited ethnography” and Olwig and Hastrup’s (1997) view of the field as being a “field of relations,” qualitative internet researchers are looking for ways to move beyond bounded sites, to follow connections made meaningful from a specific setting (Hine, 2000). For example, in their discussion of methodological

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<sup>4</sup> For an extended critique of the two-realm approach that governs thinking about the Internet, and a discussion of how to enhance understanding of the intensity of the interrelationship between online and offline, see Orgad, 2007.

approaches to the analysis of adolescents' internet literacy practices, Leander and McKim (2003) propose replacing the notion of users' everyday "sites" by that of "sittings".<sup>5</sup> They emphasize the need to develop methodologies that follow participants' practices of moving and traveling between online and offline, and within a far wider and hybrid mediascape.

However, even if the line between "online data" and "offline data" is blurring, the issues discussed in this chapter still have relevance for any researcher who is thinking through a qualitative internet project, or evaluating that of another. For example, in a study (Baron et al., 2005) of how away messages in instant messaging are used by American college students to help manage their social spheres, one set of data the researchers collected consists of 190 away messages. The other kind of data the researchers used is traditional "offline data", derived from interviews and a focus group with users. Although the distinction between online and offline data does not fully apply to this research, some of the key issues that I discussed in this chapter in relation to this distinction, may still arise and be relevant, namely, the question of triangulating different sets of data; using the face-to-face interviews with participants to contextualize their instant messaging practices; and vice versa: using the data of the instant messaging to make sense of what respondents said in their interviews.

"Online social worlds are accessible to researchers in ways that few other worlds are. If we want to understand them, we need to look with rigor and detail" (Baym, 2000, p. 198). Looking with rigor and detail may mean adopting very different methodological strategies, and taking very different decisions in the course of the research project. In this

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<sup>5</sup> In making this proposal, Leander and McKim (2003) are particularly inspired by the work of Olwig and Hastrup (1997).

chapter I have sought to discuss some of the questions, dilemmas, strategies and decisions that may be involved in grappling with aspects of online and offline data in qualitative internet research. While there are no right or wrong answers to any of the issues and the questions discussed, what is important is that the decisions made should be grounded in the particular context being studied, and the specific questions being asked.

### **Recommended Readings**

For a collection of case studies and reviews that explore methodological solutions to understanding the social interactions mediated by information and communications technologies, see Hine's (2005) edited book *Virtual Methods: Issues in Social Research on the Internet*. For particular discussions on the question of online and offline data see chapters by Mackay, Sanders, Orgad, and Rutter and Smith.

For a critical review of key epistemological, conceptual and methodological aspects related to the relationship between online and offline see Slater's chapter on Social Relationships and Identity Online and Offline in L. Lievrouw and S. Livingstone (eds) (2002), *The Handbook of New Media*. London: Sage. pp. 534-547.

For an ethnographic study of the internet, that offers a sophisticated analysis of the online/offline relationship in a situated context (Trinidad), and draws on rich ethnographic online and offline material, see Miller and Slater's (2000) *The Internet: An Ethnographic approach* (London: Berg).

For a collection of reflexive reports and short essays on researchers' experiences of doing qualitative internet research, including some discussions of issues of online and offline data, see Johns, Chen and Hall's (eds) (2004) book *Online Social Research: Methods, Issues & Ethics* (New York: Peter Lang).



## **A response to Shani Orgad**

**Maria Bakardjieva**

Most of my work has approached the internet from the direction of everyday life, that is, from the side of the living person typing away on the keyboard with the messy desk around her or the laptop humming in her lap. My research questions, in very general terms, focus on what brings this person to this keyboard and screen and what she might bring back from the screen to her immediate environment in terms of action, meanings and relationships. From this perspective, the online and offline look so entwined that it hardly makes any sense to talk about them as separate sources of data. After all, the internet is exactly that place where the online and the offline meet. To study it would mean to hold both sides in view at the same time, especially because every so often the internet is only a bridge between one offline and another. With that said, it is also true that the internet is many different things and its research is an incredibly diverse enterprise. In order to find our way in the maze, it is useful to coin taxonomies and rely on them when trying to construct meaningful and feasible research projects. So, I will accept the invitation to explore the utility of the dichotomy between online and offline data.

To begin, I recontextualize the title question of this chapter itself by asking: Why is the issue of grappling with online and offline data important, or is it? What other research design questions are related to it and may in fact need to be addressed before the online/offline data issue arises?



### **Studying the context of what?**

At many places in her essay Shani Orgad mentions the importance of us being attentive to the “context that we are studying.” My argument here will be that before we can start inspecting the context, we have to answer the “of what” question: What is our research object and, surely, what do we want to learn about it? The “research object,” comprises the phenomenon that we ask our research question about. Indisputably, in social research we do not deal with naturally existing objects that we literally stumble upon and become curious about. Indeed, it is often argued that natural scientists may be running out of such objects as well, if they have ever had them (see Hacking, 1999).

In qualitative social research, our objects are, admittedly and unapologetically constructed (see for example Crotty, 1998). As much as the internet may be teeming with mailing lists or discussion forums on which people post their messages, the online or virtual communities of soap opera fans or women with breast cancer are certainly “phenomena” seen as such and defined by researchers. Numerous teenagers log onto the internet every day, or for that matter, never log off, but the phenomenon of teenagers’ internet use is isolated and constructed as an object to be investigated for its properties, peculiarities, favourable and unfavourable conditions, applications and effects by researchers. This, we must realize, places tremendous power and responsibility in our hands. Our power stems from the fact that we can choose how to label, slice, turn, expand or trim down our object (see, for example, Hine’s chapter, this volume; Markham, 2004). And our responsibility, of course, compels us to do this in a way that respects the efforts and achievements of those who have tackled the same or similar research objects before

us, and to endeavour to say something useful to the others who might want to learn about our object down the road. Very importantly, the theory we espouse will play a central role in how we see and isolate our research object from the stream of social life.

Once a researcher has defined her object, she should try to decide what she wants to know about that object. Say for example you have stumbled upon a phenomenon that others speak about as ‘blogging’. You are ready to accept that label and feel excited about studying it. Here, then, is the place to ask yourself what your definition of blogging is and what you are curious to find out about it. Leaving the definitional part of this process aside (because the definitions of blogging vary greatly), I, personally, would be most interested in learning why people (or a particular category of them to make things manageable) blog, what meaning they ascribe to their blogs, what relationships they form in the process of blogging and how the activity and its associated experiences affect their lives. You may notice that I have shifted the research object enough to probably warrant a change of label. My research object may be more accurately called “bloggers.” You, on your part, prefer to stick with blogs as a particular kind of content appearing on the internet and wish to know how blogs are similar and different in style and dynamic from other online texts. Or what categories of blogs could be identified in the growing tide of blogging. Our different curiosities, then, may lead us to wade through texts on the internet (more likely you) or meet with people in homes, classrooms and cafes (most definitely me), or both (of which Shani Orgad’s study is an excellent example). The reflexive monitoring of how good a job we are doing, involves not so much wondering if we should collect data online or off, but making sure that we are thoroughly and

comprehensively engaging with our chosen research object in pursuit of answers to the questions we have raised.

**On-page, on-screen, on-line and off.**

Those of us who come to internet research down the route of Media Studies may agree that as a discipline Media Studies stands on three legs: the study of content (print, audio, and video), the study of production organizations and processes, and the study of reception and audiences (as can be easily recognized in McQuail's (2000) influential *Mass Communication Theory*). There is a very clear analogy here with the online/offline distinction in internet research that Orgad discusses. That is why I find it hard to accept her claim that such a distinction has "never been made in qualitative research concerning different communication media." We may not have talked about these earlier studies in the same way, but it takes only a brief look into the scholarly journals devoted to "traditional" media to discover that the studies reported there orient themselves to one or more of the three dimensions pointed above. Think about research on images of women in the media, or racism in the media, or the representation of different political or health issues in the media. All such studies are based decisively on on-page, on-screen and on-radio-wave data. On the other hand, studies of reception focus on the experiences and responses of audiences and collect extensive or in-depth off-page and off-screen data (some of the classic example here would be Lull, 1991; Morley, 1986; Radway, 1984; Silverstone, 1994). Then, there are studies that combine the analysis of on-media texts with off-page and off-screen interviews and observations (Morley, 1980; Philo, & Berry, 2004)

All pre-internet media: the press, film, radio and television, have been interpreted and researched as cultural artefacts and as culture, to reiterate Hine's (2000) distinction of approaches to studying the internet. I insist on us noticing this continuity so that we can learn from the achievements of earlier scholarship. It can teach us vital lessons about how to delimit our objects of inquiry as well as what questions might be interesting to ask about them. Pre-internet media scholarship demonstrates that excellent studies can be conducted on either content or audiences alone as well as on the interaction between the two. I tend to think about these approaches as user-centered versus medium-centered and believe the same distinction can be applied to internet studies.

Arguably, it is in the best interest of our collective knowledge that the work done on these different aspects of the media-in-society nexus be balanced out in the overall body of scholarly production. Otherwise, we may get collectively lost in on-media content without users, or, equally harmful, neglect the importance of on-media images and events as part of the social world of users. This, however, does not mean that each and every study should attempt to straddle both sides of the on/off slash. It all depends on how you carve and delimit your research object and questions.

In one of my projects (Bakardjieva, 2005), I was interested in studying internet's integration into the everyday life of the home. I visited and interviewed users in their homes, or as Orgad would put it in "traditional research contexts." It should be noted, however, that at the time I was collecting my data, there was nothing traditional in a living room or basement with a connected computer pitched in the middle of it. I "toured" the interior of users' computers examining the content of their bookmarks and e-mails and hoping to tap into the meaning those electronic artefacts had for users. In most cases

this was all the evidence there was about my respondents' life online simply because the majority of them did not participate in online groups and had not created their own websites. Thus, to try to collect data from online spaces would have been unreasonable and impractical in the framework of that particular study. As Slater (2002) has observed: "virtuality is one possible, but not necessary, emergent feature of people's assimilation of the new medium and has to be established empirically in any given case" (p. 540).

At the same time, I became very curious about the online community related experiences a few of my informants had reported. Later, I went on to carry out a different study that took as its object the supportive cultures attained by some online groups: What contributed to the emergence of such cultures? What held these communities together? How did they manage their affairs day in and day out? With such a research object and set of questions in hand, my main observations had to be conducted online, not necessarily as an ethnography, but as an analysis of the interactive texts in which community life materialized. Yet, in order to make sense of these texts, I felt I should engage community members in e-mail interviews as well. In the interviews I asked members about the broader experiences that shaped and were transformed by their online participation. Despite the fact that those were computer-mediated interviews, they generated valuable insights into the ways in which people's online and offline worlds were intertwined (see Bakardjieva and Feenberg, 2001, Feenberg and Bakardjieva, 2005).

### **E-mail and other rowdy hybrids**

After having studied the internet for ten years, I would be the last person to argue that there is only continuity between the internet and previous media. However, the major

break through does not lie in the “discovery” of the distinction between online and offline by internet research. On the contrary: in the case of the internet, communication forms and activities flow through the online/offline divide as never before. Consequently, medium, content and users cannot be easily separated. Take for example the most prolific of internet species, e-mail. E-mails are neither online content alone nor offline behaviour of audiences. To me, it is quite obvious that they are both. The same applies to instant messaging, voice-over-IP uses, videoconferencing, chatting and many other internet-facilitated activities. In projects focusing on these internet applications, I fully agree with Orgad, the distinction between online and offline data would be, or more precisely, has always been significantly blurred. That is why this dichotomy should be revisited and possibly replaced by other more useful distinctions such as: user-centered versus medium-centered approaches (as suggested above); naturally-occurring data versus researcher-elicited data; participant versus non-participant observation; interview data versus computer-captured and compiled data, and possibly, many other typologies that would better inform and guide our research design choices.

The awkwardness of the online/offline data distinction becomes obvious in Orgad’s categorization of the e-mail interview as a source of online data. Even though accounts solicited via e-mail may have reached the researcher over internet protocol and wire, are they not a type of data significantly different from the postings that cancer patients had done spontaneously on their discussion boards? If those interviews had been carried out by phone, would that have put them in an entirely different class of data? There are of course specifics in what an online interview can achieve compared to its face-to-face or phone-mediated counterpart. But the subtleties of these different versions

of the interview method are not at all elucidated by the online/offline distinction. Thus the e-mail interview is another rowdy hybrid that has to be understood along several dimensions, in parallel and contrast with a number of other alternative approaches, instead of being forced on one side of the online/offline hedge.

To take another example: If a researcher asks his participants to record their media use in blogs or e-mail messages instead of paper diaries, will that automatically turn their entries into online data? And if so, what would be the significant difference? In my view, this would be another technical incarnation of the diary method, which may bring about more convenience and regularity of entry-making, more effective communication between subjects and researchers, etc., but it will not constitute an essentially new type of 'online data' different from the paper (offline?) version.

### **In conclusion**

My advice to those who prepare for qualitative internet research, therefore, will start with a perhaps familiar incantation: Define your research object and formulate your question first. Decide what the data necessary for studying your research object may look like and where you can find them. This will likely involve consideration of what sides of your object are made up of online texts and interactions and what you could learn about it through offline or online interviews and observations. What will be your entry point/s? Then proceed as with any other study – specify your methods and how to go about applying them.

At the end of the day, qualitative internet research is like the qualitative research of any other area of mediated social life. It involves looking at people, their hustle and

bustle, their conversations, their artefacts and texts produced in and through different media. It requires careful planning, ethical choices and imaginative decision-making. And I am ready to bet that as we move into the future, research on most areas of social life will be also internet-related research. Thus online and offline data will routinely be collected and used for what they are – complementary records of events unfolding within the same social world and not as specimens from two different planets.

### **Recommended Reading**

For a discussion of the continuity and differences between methodologies used to study the content of traditional media and the internet see Seale, Clive (2005), New directions for critical internet health studies: representing cancer experience on the web, *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 27(4), pp. 515-540.

For a study of internet use combining quantitative and qualitative methods in a systematic way see Selwyn, N., Gorard, S, & Furlong, J. (2005) Whose Internet is it anyway? Exploring adults' (non)use of the Internet in everyday life, *European Journal of Communication*, Vol. 20(1): 5–26.

For a productive ethnographic approach to internet adoption and integration into the life of a small Irish town see Ward, Katie (2003), An ethnographic study of Internet consumption in Ireland: Between domesticity and the public participation, [http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/EMTEL/reports/ward\\_2003\\_ementel.pdf](http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/EMTEL/reports/ward_2003_ementel.pdf)

For an effective analysis of qualitative interviews in the course of a project examining the gendering of domestic Internet practices see Van Zoonen, L. (2002) 'Gendering the Internet: Claims, controversies and cultures', *European Journal of Communication* 17(1): 5–23.

For a “child-centered” study navigating the offline and online with interesting results, see Livingstone, Sonia (2006), Children’s privacy online: Experimenting with Boundaries within and beyond the family, in Kraut, R., Brynin, M, & Kiesler, S. (Eds.), *Computers, Phones and the Internet: Domesticating Information Technology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.





## **Response to Shani Orgad**

**Radhika Gajjala**

In her essay, Shani Orgad does a wonderful job of articulating what it means to do qualitative research with the internet as the site for research. She points to the necessity of examining both online and offline phenomena. In my response, I agree with what she has written. However, I note that the assumptions of most internet research (and this is not just in reference to Shani Orgad's essay) is based on the assumption that 'online' and 'offline' are physical states of being and that they are implicitly treated as somehow distinct and mutually exclusive. However, when we actually scrutinize what it means to 'be online' and 'to be offline' we see that they are not separable states of being in actuality-- for when we 'are online' we are simultaneously somewhere else physically as well-- but we are definitely not disembodied (i.e. without body) when we 'are online.' Neither are we not online or not connected when we're 'are' offline, since we are simultaneously connected physically, hands typing, eyes reading, mouth speaking and engaged with activities around us in the wider physical space surrounding us as well. But in being online we cannot really separate our being online from being offline, because online and offline are not discrete entities. In a sense, using this vocabulary, Orgad is trying to emphasize the simultaneity of being online and offline, and she does it well. But the vocabulary itself limits our ability to study practices of everyday life in relation to internet communication.

We need to examine online and offline binary and assumptions behind it by asking what it means to shift to the examination to practices of everyday life. Unpacking notions of being online vs being offline is indeed more difficult than we realize, since this

vocabulary itself is such a part of our everyday life. Although we have already established that online is ‘real,’ we continue to perpetuate the binary between online and offline as if they can be mutually exclusive in our daily practice. I myself struggle with this binary articulation as I continue my teaching and research in this area. I continually attempt to design assignments in class to make students understand how their everyday lives are impacted by internet-mediated social activities.

While I first encountered the internet as a graduate student in 1992, it is only since 1995 when I actually have been ‘living’ online, performing identities in various online contexts. This living online took various forms. I had ‘homes’ on MOOs (Multi-user domain object oriented) such as Lambda moo, PMC moo, Media moo and Lingua moo.<sup>1</sup> I was an active participant on several email lists and also a list founder, owner and moderator of some lists (the women-writing-culture list, the third-world-women list, the postcolonial list and the sa-cyborgs list). I was a ‘lurker’ (i.e. someone who only reads but does not post) on USENET bulletin boards. I also built a website, where I experimented with various software through which I would try to represent myself in a variety of ways using text, image and even sound.

This living online became my methodology for studying cyberspace and virtual community which I termed cyberethnography. I started to focus on studying a South Asian women’s email list (SAWnet) using this methodology. My book *Cyberselves: Feminist Ethnographies of South Asian Women* describes these research efforts in detail. Thus my collection of “data” occurred through what I learned about myself online and those that I interacted with online – ethnographically and autoethnographically.

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<sup>1</sup> You can do a search on google for each of these MOOs and see if they are still around and try them out.

My efforts researching the internet are currently closely linked to my teaching pedagogy, through which I focus on trying to make my students understand how meaning making in their everyday lives and in online settings are interrelated. I design assignments in class to try and guide students to understand the production of raced/classed identities through online/offline intersections. This examination is layered and multimodal. In my classes, graduate and undergraduate students are asked to interact within online socio-cultural networks. Below I discuss some examples. As you will note, we followed much of what Shani Orgad suggests in her essay about qualitative internet research – we examined online and offline data. At the point at which we “become the interface” I attempt to articulate how offline and online interweave.

In the case of LinguaMOO (see <http://lingua.utdallas.edu:7000/4425>), most of the students who were asked to explore that environment were unfamiliar with it (with the exception of a few students who had been cybernauts before the world-wide-web and graphic user interfaces took over the internet). This unfamiliarity itself worked to produce an encounter with the interface that revealed interesting insights. In the case of Myspace, it should be noted that only a few of the students exploring that environment were comfortable being at the same online site at which those that were being studied were producing selves – the rest were more comfortable doing textual analyses – while drawing their understanding of online praxis through their experience of being on a similar but separate social networking environment, Facebook. This allowed them to understand, through doing, the limitations of the form and the nature of the online conditions for production of selves as we examined text produced by those we were studying.

The students' attempts to understand the offline conditions of existence had to be limited to observation and interviews over a two month period of time. Textual analyses about the particular online environment being studied were supplemented with oral histories and interviews offline to produce a multidimensional understanding of how the offline and online interact in producing online raced and classed subjects. In placing our bodies within and in relation to cyber 'space' and by 'putting stuff'<sup>2</sup> in cyberspace, we produce interactional performative interfaces. As we produce selves at the interface – we become the interface with which others interact.

'Becoming the interface' might suggest a 'leaving behind' of the body to some. However, since becoming the interface happens through a re-coding of the self through an interplay of online and offline practices of meaning-making, we can never really leave the body behind. Practices that form an integral part of who we are online come from embodied, material everyday practices that are shaped by and in turn shape how we move through the world as raced, gendered, classed beings. Thus, at the online/offline intersection, I produce myself through acts of knowledge, memory and everyday habit reaching for conversations and sites that recognize my presence. Physicality of the body is expressed through everyday material practices, even when those practices involve online production of self. The practice of *engaging* such a technological environment produces the subject/agent. Meaning, therefore, is made through doing—doing in this case is coding, programming, typing oneself into existence and building objects.

Jennifer Daryl Slack (1989: 339, italics mine) writes that

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<sup>2</sup> One of my undergraduate students, during a discussion of the notion of space said space is somewhere "we put stuff in." Thought of in this manner, various newer cyber-environments such as facebook, myspace and older ones such as MOOs and MUDs are where people "put stuff" – collections that contribute to the performativity of online identities within context of race, class, geography, ethnicity, religion and gender.

Technology is not simply an object connected in various ways to the institutional and organizational structures from within which it emerges to be reconnected in a new context, but . . . it is *always an articulated moment of interconnections among the range of social practices, discursive statements, ideological positions, social forces, and social groups within which the object moves.*

How are these articulated moments of interconnections manifested in relation to the internet? Could it be that the vocabulary and binaries generated (such as online and offline, virtual and real and so on) actually shape social practices and discursive statements through specific ideological positions and power dynamics? Scholars such as Marvin (1988), Slack (1989) and Sterne (2003) have pointed out how social ideological struggles are negotiated in relation to technologies and how various practices produce hierarchies around the use, consumption, production, design, reproduction and circulation of such technologies. How does this impact our view on qualitative inquiry into internet mediated environments? Is internet mediation simply situated at the intersection of online and offline (where the binary online/offline remains uninterrogated)? If we are to take ideological struggles and material-discursive hierarchies into consideration as we approach the study of the internet through critical lenses, we would have to draw on particular kinds of ethnographic encounters where the researcher lives both online and offline and in relation to the digital technologies that allow her to produce her cyborg selves. Thus, the production of cyber selves through the experience of doing -- where the practices of being simultaneously online and offline, here and there in her everyday

negotiations of society and culture -- becomes integral to the study of these environments. Ethnography thus conducted is situated, immersive and critical -- not distant and “objective.”

Material practices within and in relation to digitally mediated environments, provide arenas “for negotiating issues crucial to the conduct of social life; among them, who is inside and outside, who may speak, who may not, and who has authority and may be believed” (Marvin, 1988, p. 4). Through a focus on examining practices of production of selves in and around digital technologies and digitally mediated spaces methodologically, we begin to observe on more than just how the technology works, thus getting beyond the fascination with the “newness”. Therefore, on the one hand, as Marvin (1988, pp. 4-5) states:

The focus of communication is shifted from the instrument to the drama in which existing groups perpetually negotiate power, authority, representation, and knowledge with whatever resources are available. New media intrude on these negotiations by providing new platforms on which old groups are projected onto new technologies that alter, or seem to alter, critical social distances. New media may change the perceived effectiveness of one group’s surveillance of another, the permissible familiarity of exchange, the frequency and intensity of contact, and the efficiency of customary tests for truth and deception .... New practices do not so much flow directly from technologies that inspire them as they are improvised out of old practices that no longer work in new settings.

On the other hand, as Jenny Sunden (2003) notes, a distance—both spatial/physical and between the mind/body—is created between the typist/programmer and subject typed into existence in encounters with digital interfaces such as computers. Writing about the production of selves within online text-based environments known as “MOO”, Sunden (2003, p. 4) writes:

This distance is on one level introduced in text-based online worlds through the act of typing, and further reinforced by the mediating computer technology itself. By actively having to type oneself into being, a certain gap in this construction is at the same time created. The mediation between different realms, the very creation of texts by the means of computers, makes the interspace that always exists between myself and the understanding of this self particularly clear. Following the idea of a subject that can never have a direct and unmediated access to herself, that the I writing and the I written about can never be seen as one, cyber subjects are always at least double.

The action of *producing oneself* in such an environment is enacted through typing. However, the particular participant’s agency is produced both through the act of typing and the programming that results as well as through her/his embodied negotiations of socio-cultural literacies, memories, histories, patterns and negotiations in relation to the “old groups” that Marvin (1988) mentions.

So how do we go about researching in this framework? What literally are the steps I would suggest someone follow in order to understand the acts of producing one’s self in relation to Computer-mediated environments? Now that I have laid out a case for



examining practices at the online/offline intersection and urged that we examine the practices people use to produce selves in multiple online/offline intersections, what kind of investigation and exploration of contexts is needed in order to study or understand that? The basic approach is very simple and straightforward actually. You observe and describe in great detail. It is important that every detail be noted – these will be your basic notes.

For instance, suppose you wanted to understand the social networking practices of Mexican American teens in the northwestern part of the state of Ohio. You get in touch with a group that meets that description. You find out how they engage in the practice of social networking using computers and the internet in a general way, from talking to them and to others around them (maybe parents, community leaders, siblings and so on) while also observing the environment in which they use computers. You observe how the technical infrastructure is made accessible to them and the physical, material conditions under which they access the internet. What kinds of computers and software are they using? Are they using computers in a public space such as a community center? What artifacts surround their environment as they use the computer? What conversations do they seem to engage in as they sit around near the computers? You make detailed notes – take pictures and videos when and if you have permission and human subject review board approval for this. Sometimes you will be able to take pictures and videos under the condition that you do not use such material for public presentation. That is fine. Because having the pictures and/or video on hand for viewing later is useful to your analysis anyway.

The next step is to ask them to make notes and journal for you if they are agreeable and also to interview a few of them in-depth. Tape-record interviews when possible – but also have a research partner taking detailed notes and observations while you interview if possible. There will be instances in your notes that you will end up focusing on since those will give you particular insights into why someone is at this particular online/offline intersection and how they negotiate the particular socio-technical environment. You will begin to build theory from the basic narratives you have recorded by connecting them to existing frameworks in the discipline and elsewhere in order to articulate a framework for understanding the particular practices you observed.

As you are following the steps laid out above, you will also explore the online context in which these interviewees are social networking. Thus if they are using myspace.com – you need to explore that network both as an outside viewer just reading the websites and as a user who begins to use the network. You begin to live in the networks that your interviewees are living in – with their permission of course. You will then be able to describe the social networking environment and experience as you see it as well – in detail.

Alongside all the above, you will need to contextualize the users that you are studying. In order to do this, you will need to research the history of migration of Mexican Americans to NW Ohio and also talk to various members of the community about their individual stories of travel and life in the community. These oral histories and literature reviews will contribute further to your understanding and analysis of the online/offline intersection. In contextualizing, it is also necessary to view media representations of the community within which you are examining the online/offline

intersection in order to contextualize how the online presences may be read by a mainstream audience.

From what I have laid out above, one can see that to study “qualitatively” the online/offline intersections through a cyberethnographic focus on “epistemologies of doing,” the researcher has to do a multi-layered investigation of self and others, while also collecting statistical and other kinds of data as is relevant to the particular context being examined (Gajjala, Rybas and Altman, 2007).

### **Recommended Readings:**

Regarding epistemology and knowledge, I recommend Dalmiya & Alcoff’s chapter: “Are old wives’ tales justified?” in the edited collection *Feminist Epistemologies* (1993, Routledge). This chapter explains the philosophical basis for the concept of “epistemologies of doing”

To help illustrate how technologies are a part of our everyday lives, I recommend Marvin’s *When old technologies were new* (1988, Oxford University Press); Munt’s *Technospaces* (2001, Continuum Press). I also recommend the three articles by Slack listed in the references below (1981, 1983, 2005). These readings contribute to the basis for my refusal of the mutually exclusive binaries of “online” vs “offline” and “virtual” vs “real.”

