Real Interviews in an Online World

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After you study Chapter 1, you will be able to do the following:

- Describe how interviews contribute to scholarly studies;
- Identify reasons why researchers choose to conduct interviews over the Internet;
- Compare and contrast evolving characteristics of synchronous and asynchronous online communication; and
- Discuss ways to think about "richness" of online communication.

Interview Research: A Window Into the Lived Experience

Each individual experiences the world in a uniquely different way. Each finds significance in life events by interpreting and reinterpreting meaning through lenses of memory, culture, and prior occurrences. Researchers who want to understand the complex human drama often choose interviews as an entrée into another's observations, thoughts, and feelings.

When individuals respond and share their stories, researchers can observe nonverbal signals and listen to verbal expressions. The potential fullness of this active exchange has traditionally motivated researchers to choose face-to-face conversations when collecting data for qualitative and mixed-methods research. Implications of physical setting and the

demeanor of the interviewer are carefully considered to develop the rapport and trust necessary to collect robust data.

Must individuals sit in the same room to have a meaningful dialogue? In many areas of life and work, activities that people previously assumed would need physical proximity are now conducted via electronic communications. Scholarly activities are included in this trend. Contemporary researchers expect to use computers when writing about research design, analyzing data, and creating reports of their findings. Researchers routinely use the Internet to study the existing literature in their fields through online journals and databases. Scholars expect to discuss their work along the way with far-flung colleagues through e-mail lists, blogs, social media, and interactive websites. Increasingly, researchers are using the Internet to collect data as well.

Emerging **Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs)** offer new ways to conduct research interviews. Access to the Internet and the wide availability of sophisticated software mean that researchers can easily talk directly with subjects in their homes or offices. **Online interviews** are a viable alternative because researchers can choose from varied communication options to best fulfill the purpose and design of the study.

Synchronous and Asynchronous Communication

Online interaction is typically categorized according to the ability to send, receive, and respond to messages at the same time, **synchronous communication**, or at different times, **asynchronous communication.** The medium may be new, but none of the many modes of electronic communication is wholly unique to the online environment. Whether face-to-face or online, communication typically mixes verbal and nonverbal, written and symbolic visual modes. In person, synchronous real-time communication occurs when people meet or talk on the telephone. Online, synchronous communications can include written, verbal, and/or visual exchange. By attaching a headset and logging onto a free online service, people can use **voice over Internet protocol VoIP** instead of the telephone, making it possible to have free conversations with anyone in the world with similar access to a computer. By adding a Web camera, researchers and participants can use desktop videoconferencing and see each other while they converse. Researchers can adopt platforms designed for online meetings for interview purposes, using shared whiteboards and other tools that allow them to see materials and artifacts in addition to talking with and seeing each other. Or, they can interact in immersive 3-D virtual environments such as **Second Life,** where they are represented by the avatars they design.

Asynchronous communications, which do not constrain people to participate at the same time, occur when people correspond by letter or read and write print publications. Online asynchronous communications occur when people correspond by e-mail or through short text messages sent back and forth using cell phones or computers. People communicate asynchronously when they make posts and respond to others in discussion **forums**, on social media sites, **wikis**, or blogs.

Each ICT has its own set of opportunities and limitations. Online, asynchronous communication entails two types of displacement—time and space—while synchronous communication entails one type of displacement—space (Bampton & Cowton, 2002). Synchronous modes bring people one step closer together, yet many people find the reflective pause between message and response leads to deeper consideration of the matter at hand.

The choice between synchronous and asynchronous modes—or the choice to blend them—is significant. Because the online environment offers many modes of communication, researchers can match the characteristics of the media to specific design requirements of their inquiry. These requirements depend on the characteristics of interviewer and interviewee and constraints inherent in the study context. Depending on the purpose and design of the study, interviewers may choose a verbal communication mode that allows them to ask questions and interpret immediate responses or choose a written mode that allows interviewees to take time to think about the question and respond. Factors for selection of technology tools are explored in depth in Chapter 2.

The Internet: The Medium Warms

The word *Internet* simply does not mean the same thing today as it did even a decade ago. As a result, many criticisms of electronic tools as inadequate for the nuanced, sometimes emotion-filled communication intrinsic to research interviews need to be re-examined. Early comparisons of behavior and communication focused on what was lost in the migration from in-person to online interactions. Some critics expressed concern that text-based e-mail messages and static websites disallowed development of intimacy, **immediacy**, or a sense of presence. In 1998 one participant described an asynchronous, text-based online discussion:

> It is a cold medium. Unlike face-to-face communication you get no instant feedback. You don't know how people responded to your comments; they just go out into silence. This feels isolating and unnerving. It is not warm and supportive. (Wegerif, 1998, p. 38)

Like the globe, the Internet is "warming." The Internet now allows for instant feedback so contrasts between online and face-to-face communications are less stark. Indeed, direct comparisons become harder to make as the online reality becomes more distinctive, and ways of experiencing it encompass more dimensions.

In contrast to the earlier linear forms of information search and retrieval of information, contemporary online behavior is more communicative and reciprocal. Internet users follow links from site to site with ever-branching discoveries leading to new questions to explore. The ever-evolving cyberspace "does not imitate the real world, but rather creates a rapid, new, immediate, multi-layered world" (Sade-Beck, 2004, p. 3). In this multilayered online world, the concept of "presence" is itself evolving.

> Presence is not simply the opposite of absence. Technologies of communication are not just substitutes for face-to-face interaction, but constitute a new resource for constructing a kind of connected presence even when people are physically distant. In the regime of "connected" presence, participants multiply encounters and contacts using every kind of mediation and artifacts available to them: relationships thus become seamless webs of quasi-continuous exchanges. The boundaries between absence and presence get blurred and subtle experiences of togetherness may develop. (Licoppea & Smoredab, 2005, p. 321)

In the physical environment, "presence" is an either-or situation—you are either present or not. Online, people feel present in different ways, including the following:

- *Environmental presence:* the extent to which the environment itself recognizes and reacts to the person;
- *Personal presence:* the extent to which the person feels physically present in the environment;
- *Social presence:* the extent to which the person has the feeling of being together and communicating with others to achieve meaningful interactions, establish and maintain relations, and create productive social systems in online environments; and
- *Cognitive presence:* the extent to which the person feels the potential to participate in critical thinking and community of inquiry (Baños et al., 2008; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2004; Heeter, 2003; Kehrwald, 2008; Suler, 2003).

Recent evidence shows that people feel deeply present with others online. Familiarity with Internet-based interactions using varied communications technologies in daily professional, social, and family life enhances their comfort in the medium and strengthens the connections they make online.

COMMUNICATION RICHNESS

Media Richness Theory (MRT) provides one way to classify different kinds of Internet communication by distinguishing between "lean" and "rich" media based on "the capacity for immediate feedback, the number of cues and channels utilized, personalization, and language variety" (Daft & Lengel, 1986, p. 580). Daft and Lengel argued that "rich media" allow people to provide and receive immediate feedback, check interpretations, and understand multiple cues via body language, tone of voice, and message content. Others believe it is important to assess richness in terms of the potential for creating immediacy and, as noted above, a sense of presence. "Rich" media results in greater socio-emotional communication, reduces the physical or psychological distance between individuals, and fosters affiliation (Erickson & Herring, 2005; Kahai & Cooper, 2003; Mehrabian, 1971; O'Sullivan, Hunt, & Lippert, 2004).

Researchers have demonstrated that while text-based communication is "lean," as a medium according to MRT it can be used effectively as a way to conduct interviews. O'Sullivan and colleagues found that some people use cues in online text that consist of "novel ways of expressing immediacy that have no parallel with conventional immediacy behaviors" when trying to shape a receiver's sense of closeness (O'Sullivan et al., 2004, p. 472). For example, to enrich text-based dialogue and make up for lost social cues, online communicators use textual and graphic images and symbols such as emoticons (Erickson & Herring, 2005). Ross (2001) suggests that in the fast or immediate back-and-forth of electronic communication that parties are actively engaged in interpreting each other's messages and questioning meanings in a way that may enhance understanding. A thoughtful assessment of online communication "emphasizes understanding between parties rather than a simple notion of channel capacity" and questions the assumption that decreasing richness as Daft and Lengel defined it means less ability to process information and build understanding (Ross, 2001, p. 76).

Simeon Yates coined the term *say-writing* to describe the ways that **Computer Mediated Communication (CMC)** encourages and supports a new type of genre that combines features of written mode with features of spoken mode (Yates, 1996). Other researchers make similar observations:

> We concluded that the virtual [text chat] interview went some way towards bridging the oral/written divide. Although clearly in written format, the type of comment was very oral in nature. The researchers and participants paid little attention to spelling and grammar, as the nature and meaning of the conversation took precedence over the correctly written word. As such, the transcript very much resembles a "written conversation." (Connor & Madge, 2001, para. 10.18)

Computer networks are often considered a *medium* of communication dis-
tinct from writing and speaking. CMC exchanges are typically faster than
written exchanges (e.g., of letters, or published essays which respond to one
another), yet still significantly slower than spoken exchanges, since even in so-
called "real-time" modes, typing is slower than speaking. (Herring, 2003, p. 2)

Just as online written dialogue has characteristics of verbal communi-
cation, it also allows for some of the subtleties associated with **nonverbal
communication**.

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATIONS
AND ONLINE INTERVIEWS

Researchers making use of diverse combinations of communications tech-
nologies to carry out interviews grasp meaning from varied verbal and
nonverbal cues. To do so they must re-examine the ways such cues are
defined and interpreted.

Nonverbal cues affect any interview process. Ong (1990) observes that
"'words, words, words' mean nothing unless built into a nonverbal context,
which always controls meanings of words" (p. 1). Interviewees reveal depth
of expression and display cultural and social norms that often guide nonver-
bal behavior (Fontana & Frey, 2003; Kalman, Ravid, Raban, & Rafaeli, 2006).

Four modes of nonverbal communication are as follows:

1. *Chronemics* refers to the use of pacing and timing of speech, and the
   length of silence before a response in conversation.

2. *Paralinguistic* communication or paralanguage describes variations
   in volume, pitch, and quality of voice.

3. *Kinesic* communication includes facial expressions, eye contact or
   gaze, body movements, or postures.

4. *Proxemic* communication describes the use of interpersonal space to
   communicate attitudes (Gordon, 1980; Guerrero, DeVito, & Hecht,
   1999; Kalman et al., 2006).

The Social Information Processing (SIP) theory argues that "when
most nonverbal cues are unavailable, as is the case in text-based CMC,
users adapt their language, style, and other cues to such purposes"
(Walther, Loh, & Granka, 2005, p. 37). When participants communicate
with text-only e-mail, the timing of response, silence, or nonresponse pro-
vides researchers with chronemic nonverbal data. When people chat or
text message in real time the length of time between post and response
provides pacing and turn-taking in the conversation. Conversations can
overlap, with many participants effectively "speaking" at once, as often

happens in online chats. As Jacobsen (1999) describes it, "cyberdiscursivity" is a dynamic rhetoric allowing for mutual, reciprocal "textual creation/recreation" (p. 9). Network latency and multitasking by participants introduce effects that are different from face-to-face contexts, and which can lead to misinterpretation of temporal cues. The interviewer may believe the participant is struggling with a slow response, when in fact he or she has been distracted by an incoming e-mail.

In synchronous chat or asynchronous e-mail, interviewees control when they choose to respond (Mann & Stewart, 2000). There can be pauses in face-to-face interviews, of course, but in an e-mail interview the delay in interaction between researcher and subject can range from seconds (virtually real time) to hours or days. In planning the interview with participants, the researcher usually wants to accommodate the participant by allowing some degree of freedom to determine pace of response. The way participants exercise such freedoms may or may not offer further insight. Slower responses may indicate more powerful reflection on the deeper meanings of the inquiry (Bampton & Cowton, 2002; James & Busher, 2006). On the other hand, quick replies may indicate lack of adequate consideration by the interviewee.

If the gap between questions and answers is too long, responses and follow-up probes can lead to discontinuous responses, and the thread of interview is lost (James & Busher, 2006; Kitto & Barnett, 2007; Mann & Stewart, 2000). The researcher may be left to wonder why the interviewee has not responded. The interviewee may simply be busy or need more time to devise an answer. However, it also is possible that there may be a problem with some aspect of the question, and the respondent is reluctant to ask for clarification (Bampton & Cowton, 2002; Kitto & Barnett, 2007). When an interview takes too long and loses focus, enthusiasm can wane for the interviewee. Similarly, if the researcher is too slow to respond, participants may doubt the researcher's commitment and engagement in the research (James & Busher, 2006).

Uncertainty of meaning for chronemic cues in the e-mail interview may be addressed by creating some protocols for timing and follow-up, and for the anticipated length of the interview. The researcher must strike an appropriate balance between allowing interviewees time to respond as they wish and maintaining the momentum of the dialogue (Bampton & Cowton, 2002).

While text-based exchanges can foster the trust and rapport necessary to collect data, verbal interchange in real time provides additional nonverbal as well as verbal data. The rich media interview brings researcher and participants together in real time and in a virtual space, allowing for increased immediacy and presence. In interviews conducted with Web-based applications together with audio through VoIP or telephone, researchers listen to interviewees and collect data on chronemic and paralanguage aspects of their responses. Researchers using videoconferencing or video calls can use

some level of kinesic communication, such as facial expressions and gestures, although eye contact may be more difficult to attain. When a shared whiteboard or shared immersive space is used, haptic movements become part of the kinesic communication process. Proxemic communication, interpreted as physical distance between communicators, is not applicable or must be reinterpreted for online contexts.

A further issue of nonverbal cues and online interviews involves determining when an interview is nearing its end. If the interview participant fails to respond, it may be a signal that he or she wants to withdraw from study but does not want to tell the interviewer (Hunt & McHale, 2007).

In a face-to-face interview, the interviewer can usually sense when time is running out and adjust his or her approach to the discussion accordingly, ensuring that certain issues are tackled as a matter of priority. It is less easy to sense when an online interviewee is ready to conclude the interview unless he or she states so explicitly (Bampton & Cowton, 2002). In addition, the interviewer has less control over the interviewee deciding to terminate the interview. An online interviewee can end the interview at the press of a button, whereas an interviewee in a face-to-face interview has to physically leave or request the interviewer to leave (Chen & Hinton, 1999; James & Busher, 2006). The online interviewer has fewer options for recovering a difficult interaction (such as apologizing for an inappropriate question, requesting that the interviewee remain, or retracting a line of questioning) before the interviewee simply logs out (James & Busher, 2006).

Scholarly research guidelines require that an interview be complete for the data from the interview to be used without conditions. When the interviewee fails to complete the interview, the researcher must decide whether to use partial information that was collected or to discard the data (Hunt & McHale, 2007). Careful design (see Chapters 3 and 4), participant selection (see Chapter 5), preparation (see Chapter 6), and alignment of ICT with interview approach (see Chapters 2 and 7) can optimize the potential for successfully engaging the participant through all stages of data collection.

Why Conduct Interviews Online?

Researchers opt to conduct interviews online for a variety of reasons. One obvious reason common to almost all online researchers is cost, since online interviews can be planned and conducted without the time and expense of travel. However, cost is one among many considerations for this important decision. Online researchers report significant reduction or elimination of constraints that would make in-person interviews

impractical. An increased pool of study participants is possible, including geographically dispersed, international, disabled, or socially isolated individuals (Ahern, 2005; Bowker & Tuffin, 2007; Connor, 2006; Mann & Stewart, 2003). When research participants are in locations that limit access to outsiders, such as hospitals or closed workplaces, it might be possible for a researcher to have a virtual presence where a physical presence would not be allowed.

Online participants may be more relaxed because they are communicating with the researcher in the comfort of a familiar environment. As a result, they may be willing to discuss sensitive or personal matters, such as emotions or disorders that are hard to reveal in person (Cabiria, 2008a; Hunt & McHale, 2007; Mann & Stewart, 2003). People who have difficulties with spoken language or people who speak in different languages can participate more easily.

Researchers may choose online interviews to honor the principle that "research questions that explore an online phenomenon are strengthened through the use of a method of research that closely mirrors the natural setting under investigation" (Geiser, 2002, p. 3). As one researcher described the choice, "Online rather than face-to-face interviews were adopted because the researcher decided to query our target population directly within the context of their (and our) interest in Internet use" (Chou, 2001, p. 574). People who are actively involved in virtual communities, social media, or immersive environments have online identities, friends, and colleagues. Online interviews allow researchers to better understand the participant's cyber experience.

Some researchers choose to conduct interviews online because they intend to create a more egalitarian research medium. In such a medium, participants may feel better able to influence the direction of the research. Greater disclosure, mutuality, and reciprocity between the researcher and the participants may emerge in a more egalitarian setting (James & Busher, 2006; Seymour, 2001). Others opt to interview online as a way of overcoming interviewer effects. The following quotations illustrate such choices.

> Many researchers have been motivated precisely by the apparent abilities of the Internet to sidestep, transform, highlight or reinvent some traditional formations, identities and inequalities. Researchers concerned with issues of marginalized identities and fragmented communities may have been drawn to the Internet precisely as a domain of political opportunity. (Hine, 2005, p. 242)

> In cases where face-to-face interviews might be influenced by personal visual characteristics associated with age, gender, class, prestige, ethnicity and standards of ability researchers may choose the online environment where such distinctions are less overt. (Seymour, 2001, p. 148)

Not all researchers will choose to conduct their interviews online. Some researchers simply believe that establishing an interviewer-interviewee relationship online is "difficult if not impossible" (Fontana & Frey, 2003, p. 6). Common reasons for researchers to eschew online interviews include the following:

- Researchers need to be able to observe the interviewee and/or the research setting.
- They need a full range of verbal and nonverbal communications that are only available when people are physically present.
- The subject matter is highly sensitive and physical proximity is needed in case the researcher needs to comfort the research participant.
- The target research demographic lacks access to information and communications technologies.

Certainly, some types of research do require interviews with close or on-site observation, control of the surroundings, and communication options available when people are face-to-face in the same room. However, even when researchers choose to conduct interviews in person, they may find that online communication is useful for other kinds of interaction with interviewees. Researchers might use online chat for interview preparation or e-mail to follow up on the initial interview. It is unlikely that all interview research could transition into the online environment, nor would that be desirable. Some researchers will stick to established interview modes while others will find that new media options allow for meaningful interaction at various stages of the process. By understanding how all available alternatives work, researchers can make an informed choice based on the nature of their study and the strengths and constraints of available online tools.

Relevant Trends

Communications over the Internet continue to increase. Other significant developments are contributing to the twenty-first-century experience—and pervasiveness—of the Internet. A few trends are particularly relevant to online researchers. The **digital divide** is shrinking. This means there is a greater likelihood that target populations have the needed tools and skills for online research participation. Although there is still a divide between those with regular access to the Internet and those without it, more people now access the Internet at home, work, school, public spaces such as libraries, or anywhere on mobile devices. Indeed, increased **mobile access** is moving the Internet off the desktop. People can get access anywhere on phones and handheld devices.

When people go online they find greater capacity for user-generated content and **interactivity**. The Internet is ever more user-driven, with more social activity occurring online. (See the book's website for updated technology tool usage and access trend data.)

Changes in technologies allow for richer communications—by any definition—and for more opportunities to develop a sense of presence. Digital natives born to a wired world and digital immigrants who migrated from analog to digital both use ICTs for social, cultural, and professional exchanges. More people use the Internet in their daily work and social lives (Lebo, 2004; Rainie & Horrigan, 2005). More people use the Internet to access information and to conduct their own research on health and consumer issues (Fox & Fallows, 2003; Madden, 2005). In personal and social life, people find that the Internet helps preserve ties when distance makes contact in person impossible. More people interact with others online for informal, school, or work purposes. They are familiar with weblogs (Rainie, 2005), e-mail, and messaging (Shiu & Lenhart, 2004). More people are experienced with access to online media by using Internet radio, watching webcast concerts, and downloading music and digital pictures on their home computers (Rainie & Horrigan, 2005).

These shifts make new approaches for online research possible. Changing usage patterns for casual users enlarge communication options for researchers. When people become acquainted with a technology through personal use, they will be less intimidated when expected to apply it in an academic or professional setting. Broader access and increased comfort levels mean a larger pool of potential participants who are capable of participating in online research.

Closing Thoughts

An unanswered question for online researchers relates to the potential impact of a "cyberspace effect." Does cyberspace as the interview medium or location make people more open and willing to communicate, or does it make them more secretive? Does cyberspace encourage or enable them to provide different kinds of information than they might provide in face-to-face interviews (Hunt & McHale, 2007)? As more researchers study online interview methodologies, they will lay the groundwork for future researchers who will be prepared to make informed choices about the ideal online setting and medium that correspond to the needs of their research designs.

Communications technologies that offer rich and persistent communications benefit the online researcher. Undoubtedly, functionality and access will continue to evolve—and may have changed significantly between the time I write this and the time you read it in print. That is why updates to this book are available on the book's website.

Researchers' Notebook: Stories of Online Inquiry

How do researchers put into practice ideas and principles presented in *Online Interviews in Real Time?* The Researchers' Notebook offers practical examples drawn from my own research and from studies conducted by other innovative online researchers who generously shared their experiences with me. This Chapter 1 Notebook introduces each researcher; I weave experiences and suggestions as relevant in Researchers' Notebooks to complement each chapter of the book. On the book's website you will find links to websites and articles if you would like to learn more about their work.

RESEARCHERS IN THE RESEARCHERS' NOTEBOOK

- **Jon Cabiria, Ph.D.** Professor of psychology at Baker College and the Pennsylvania Institute of Technology. Research interests: intersection of online social networks and human behavior.

- **Wendy L. Kraglund-Gauthier, Ph.D. candidate**. Editor/instructional designer, Continuing and Distance Education at Saint Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia, Canada. Research interests: distance and online learning.

- **Susan O'Donnell, Ph.D.** Senior research officer, People-Centred Technologies National Research Council Institute for Information Technology, and adjunct professor, Sociology University of New Brunswick Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada. Research interests: role that videoconferencing is playing in support of local economic and social development in remote aboriginal/First Nations communities in Northern Ontario.

- **Monique Sedgwick, Ph.D.** Assistant professor at the School of Health Sciences, University of Lethbridge in Alberta, Canada. Research interests: nursing and rural health.

- **Stephen Thorpe, Ph.D.** Consultant, Zenergy in Auckland, New Zealand. Research interests: facilitation in online communities.

- **Lynn Wilson, Ph.D.** Executive director, SeaTrust Institute. Research interests: environmental and ocean policy, collaboration in science and policy.

Why Do Researchers Choose to Conduct Interviews Online?

When I originally decided to conduct research on e-learning, it was clear that a global sample would be important to understand a global

phenomenon. The need to reach an increased pool of participants without costly travel motivated me to look at online research options. My research had a global scope but, alas, my budget was strictly local. Although cost was an important reason to choose online interviews, it was not the only or most important reason.

The study involved expert interviews with online instructors who teach with collaborative methods; the purpose of the study was to refine the Taxonomy of Online Collaboration (Salmons, 2009). This taxonomy is a model that provides a graphic notation system for mapping collaborative projects. To gain meaningful input from interviewees I needed an interactive, visual way to communicate. Because my target sample—online college and university instructors—was comfortable with using the Internet, technology did not present an obstacle to participation.

As an experienced presenter of webinars, I was familiar with the audio and visual features of Elluminate, an online meeting platform. Elluminate includes a shared whiteboard where I could present the model and invite interviewees to illustrate their examples with it. VoIP made verbal exchange with participants in five countries possible—without long-distance phone charges. The archiving feature of Elluminate enabled me to save a record of all aspects of such an exchange for future viewing and transcription. Together, these features made online interviews preferable to a face-to-face discussion—even if cost had not been a factor.

Finally, this study illustrated the principle that research questions that explore an online phenomenon are strengthened when the study context closely mirrors the environment under investigation (Geiser, 2002). I felt that the online interviews allowed me to "walk the talk" by collaborating online with research participants in ways that reflected the subject of the study—online collaboration.

Other researchers have their own reasons for choosing to interview online. Like me, Dr. Lynn Wilson had a limited travel budget and research participants from all over the world. Her research involved expert interviews with ocean scientists and policy experts who had restrictive schedules. Being in the same geographic area as the interview subjects would not necessarily have increased the odds for a face-to-face meeting. Because interviewees were accustomed to press interviews using phone or e-mail, they agreed to time-limited online interviews. Lynn used preinterview e-mail dialogue to answer their questions, to build credibility for her research, and to gain buy-in with initially skeptical participants. In these conversations they set expectations and protocol for the interviews. Dr. Wilson chose a shared Web-based application and **Skype** VoIP calls, so she could simultaneously manipulate data and discuss the process (Wilson, 2006).

Stephen Thorpe's doctoral research about storytelling in online groups involved participants from seven countries and twelve time zones. The only realistic approach to the research was to conduct it online (Thorpe,

2008b). This choice was also based in the fact that online media that were the subject of the study and Thorpe was studying online group interaction and group processes online, choosing a collaborative group method of co-operative inquiry seemed highly appropriate (S. Thorpe, personal communication, August 29, 2008). Synchronous tools included chat, Skype VoIP calls, web conferencing and videoconferencing, and Second Life. Two of the coresearchers in Thorpe's study are dyslexic, so the real-time audio and video provided a level playing field for them when participating in the online research. The research group adopted a "spelling doesn't count" rule in the "group culture" (also known as a group agreement or group norms). As a result, one participant said that the online research group was the first group where she had allowed herself to be fully open about her dyslexia (S. Thorpe, personal communication, August 29, 2008).

Wendy L. Kraglund-Gauthier was a doctoral learner based in Nova Scotia studying at a university in Australia through online learning. When she designed her dissertation research, she selected online methods for reasons similar to those that influenced my own research—she wanted to conduct interviews using the same online media that were the subject of her study. She chose synchronous online interviews in Elluminate because this allowed for a type of interaction not possible in person: playing back ideas from interviews "with participants, about participants." She used reviews of interview sessions as a jumping-off point to deeper probes in follow-up discussions.

Wendy noted an experience similar to Stephen's study group: the online interviews allowed her to reach a sometimes difficult-to-reach population: people with disabilities. "Depending on participants' abilities, the meeting technology easily enable[d] modifications to account for disabilities: visual for hearing impaired, audio for vision impaired, home location for mobility impaired" (W. L. Kraglund-Gauthier, personal communication, July 16, 2008).

Dr. Jon Cabiria chose Second Life as an interview milieu that allowed him to study attitudes and interactions in that immersive environment (Cabiria, 2008a, 2008c). Second Life allowed him to access diverse participants and made accessing the research convenient and flexible for participants. Conducting interviews through his avatar, he found it possible to avoid interviewer effects—potential intimidation participants may have felt when discussing sensitive matters. His study focused on gay men and lesbian women; he observed that the computer-mediated environments allowed participants to say things they might not say face-to-face (J. Cabiria, personal communication, August 18, 2008). At the same time, avatars and the virtual meeting space provided a physical connection missing in a telephone interview. Participants were offered an audio option but chose to chat by text. Text-based interactions provided Jon with an instant transcript.

Dr. Susan O'Donnell uses interviews and focus groups conducted through videoconferences to complement limited on-site work with another difficult-to-reach population: First Nations peoples of Canada. She studies how First Nations organizations are using video communications on **broadband** networks for community, social, and economic development for First Nations people in rural Canada (O'Donnell, Perley, & Simms, 2008). For this participatory research, meetings with researchers and First Nations partners are conducted with four sites connected by videoconference: Fredericton (New Brunswick), Membertou First Nation (Cape Breton, Nova Scotia), Thunder Bay (Ontario), and Sioux Lookout (Ontario). Although travel costs would be prohibitive, Susan has an additional set of considerations since these remote First Nations communities she studies have limited accommodations for visitors.

Dr. Monique Sedgwick faced a similar challenge: the participants in her study were spread across rural western and northern Canada. Participants were located from 1.5 to 16 hours from an urban center where Monique could have traveled by plane. To add to her dilemma, the winter when she conducted her study brought record snowfall, making travel nearly impossible. Because Monique's research is focused on nurses, the participants had access to the Canadian telehealth videoconferencing system at the rural hospitals where they work (Sedgwick & Spiers, 2009). The university videoconferencing system enabled her to carry out the ethnographic research interviews—without having to wait for a spring thaw. Dr. Sedgwick pointed to two additional reasons for favoring videoconferencing for interviews: (1) Researchers and participants are busy people. Taking two to four days for travel is simply not practical. (2) By reducing the need to travel, videoconference interviews leave a small carbon footprint (M. Sedgwick, personal communication, May 21, 2009).

Although all of us looked to cyberspace for practical reasons of cost and convenience, we chose to conduct our research online because we believed the kinds of interactions with target participants offered unique opportunities for robust data collection. I will continue to explore examples from these researchers' work in each chapter's Researchers' Notebook.

Key Concepts

- Researchers choose to conduct interviews online for theoretical and practical reasons.

- Researchers can use synchronous or asynchronous technologies, or a combination of the two, to prepare for, conduct, and follow up on interview research.

- The notion of presence and the possibilities for rich nonverbal and verbal communications are changing with availability of multichannel, interactive technologies.

Discussions and Assignments

Using your library database, find two scholarly articles based on data collected through interviews. Select one example of a study based on data collected in live, face-to-face interviews and one based on data collected online.

1. First, look at the rationale given for selecting online data collection. How did the researcher describe the reasons for taking this approach? Did the researcher make a compelling case? How did the basis for selection given by the researcher align with reasons discussed in Chapter 1?

2. Second, did the researcher use synchronous or asynchronous communications? Do you think the researcher would make a different choice based on technologies that have become available since the research was conducted? If you were conducting the study would you use synchronous or asynchronous communication?

3. Third, look at the article reporting on face-to-face interview research. Could these interviews have been conducted online? Why or why not?

On the Book's Website

You will find the following:

- Descriptions of Researchers' Notebook contributors' studies and links to their work
- Links to articles and materials related to online research
- Updated information

Terms

Asynchronous communication: Communications that involve a delay between message and response, meaning it is not necessary to be online at the same time.

Broadband: High-speed connection that permits transmission of images, audio and video, and large files.

Computer Mediated Communication (CMC): This term refers to human communication that occurs when messages are conveyed by computers.

Digital divide: Term describing unequal access to ICTs across social, economic, and demographic groups.

Forum: A form of asynchronous discussion where original comments and responses are organized by topic. Threaded discussion occurs when one user posts a message that is visible to other users, who respond in their own time. Also known as *threaded discussion.*

Immediacy: Immediacy refers to communicative behaviors that reduce the physical or psychological distance between individuals and foster affiliation (Mehrabian, 1971).

Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs): Umbrella term describing communication devices or applications including the following: cellular phones, computer and network hardware and software, satellite systems, as well as the various services and applications associated with them.

Interactivity: The degree of mutuality and reciprocation present in a communication setting (Kalman et al., 2006).

Mobile access: Ability to connect to the Internet anywhere using computers, cell phones, handheld computers, and personal digital assistants.

Nonverbal communication: Aspects of communication that convey messages without words. Types of nonverbal communication include the following:

- Chronemics communication is the use of pacing and timing of speech and length of silence before response in conversation.
- Paralinguistic or paralanguage communication describes variations in volume, pitch, and quality of voice.
- Kinesic communication includes eye contact and gaze, facial expressions, body movements, gestures, or postures.
- Proxemic communication is the use of interpersonal space to communicate attitudes (Gordon, 1980; Guerrero et al., 1999; Kalman et al., 2006).

Online interviews: For the purpose of this book "online interviews" refer to interviews conducted with CMC. Scholarly interviews are conducted in accordance with ethical research guidelines; verifiable research participants provide informed consent before participating in any interview.

Second Life: A massive multiplayer universe (MMU) set in a 3-D virtual world created by San Francisco–based software maker Linden Labs (Wigmore & Howard, 2009).

Skype: An IP telephony service provider that offers free calling between computers and low-cost calling to regular telephones that aren't connected to the Internet. Included in the free service is a softphone.

Synchronous communication: Communications that occur in real time, meaning it is necessary to be online at the same time.

Voice over Internet protocol (VoIP): A generic term used to describe the techniques used to carry voice traffic over the Internet (infoDev, 2008).

Wiki: A web application designed to allow multiple authors to add, remove, and edit content (infoDev, 2008).