

Using the internet in research

Methodological challenges

Dr. Urmila Goel

researcher in social and cultural
anthropology

European University Viadrina,
Frankfurt/Oder, Germany

Research project

- „The virtual second generation“
- virtual ethnography
- of an internet portal
- analysing ways of dealing with experiences of racism

How can the internet be used in research?

students' answers:

- look for information
- online sampling
- virtual ethnography
- communication among researchers

What are the advantages of using the internet in research?

students' answers:

- accessibility of information
- digital data easy to process
- bridging distance

Which problems are encountered when using the internet in research?

students' answers:

- too much information
- easy to manipulate

What ethical questions are raised by using the internet in research?

students' answers:

- hidden research
- using material without quoting source

Case Study: a PhD project

- on young Hindus in Germany
- looking for material
- surfing the internet
- contacting researchers
- reading literature
- finding an internet portal:
- „The Indian online community“

Case Study: using the internet portal

- content analysis
 - of articles and posts
 - religion a marginal topic
- looking for informants
 - posting research questions in the forum
 - no substantial information and contacts develop
- inquiring for information
 - posting question in the forum
 - link to online shop provided
- collecting information
 - following links
 - going to events

Case Study: the failure

- distance through
 - technology
 - being an outsider
- time requirement
 - to understand the space
 - to get reactions
- need to contextualise
 - to identify suitable space(s)
 - to contextualise information
- access to information
 - need gate keeper
 - is it available online?

Requirements

for using internet in research

- clarify
 - research question
 - disciplinary approach
- identify
 - adequate spaces
 - adequate methods
- check
 - available resources
- observe
 - research ethics
- adapt research project accordingly

Research ethics

1. informed consent of informants
 - problems:
 - public or private space?
 - hidden researcher
 - fluctuation
2. no negative consequences for informants
3. ensure anonymity
 - of informants, nicks, urls, texts
 - problems:
 - copyright
 - loss of information

Bibliography

- Christine Hine (ed., 2005), *Virtual Methods – Issues in Social Research on the Internet*, Oxford: Berg.
- Dan Miller and Don Slater (2000), *The Internet – An Ethnographic Approach*, Oxford: Berg.
- Nicola Döring (2003), *Sozialpsychologie des Internets*, Göttingen: Hogrefe, 2nd edition, Chapter 4 „Methoden der Online-Forschung“, 201-243.
- Radhika Gajjala (2002), „An interrupted postcolonial/ feminist cyberethnography: Complicity and resistance in the cyberfield“, in: *Feminist Media Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 177-193.