

# Crossing into the digital realm

Sarah Riley, Adrienne Evans, Christine Griffin, Yvette Morey and Helen Murphy look at the issues for researchers in online and digital research

This article reports on a discussion with a group of qualitative researchers working with digital and online research. The conversation took as its starting point the social and technological changes that make distinctions between on and off line selves increasingly irrelevant. Through this lens the group considered the distinctive contribution of qualitative research methods to investigate the complexity of the networked human experience, including the embodied and emotional elements of life online. They also considered the new BPS internet research guidelines and future areas for research, particularly the impact of an intensified life lived out through the imagined presence of another and the blurring of public and private, work and personal lives.

## questions

In the era of 'big data' what can qualitative researchers offer to digital and online research?

How do we explore the complexity of networked human experience?

## resources

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Dusting off a lecture on 'internet research' written only three years ago, it seemed so dated. The focus was on the interactive possibilities of Web 2.0 technology as a research tool, it conceptualised a virtual world, discrete from the 'real' one, and the structures and business models that enabled such technology were not considered. For this semester the lecture got a revamp. Renamed 'digital selves', it considers debates over 'Web 3.0' and uses terminology such as 'on- and offline selves' to recognise the incorporation of the internet, digital devices and digital software into everyday lives. The challenge it now highlights is how to study the flow of information on interconnected platforms that gives people a sense of agency in their identity projects, while it is also structured to benefit business.

But the old lecture does not have to be discarded completely. Some content is still relevant: unprecedented access to people and their communications; the convenience of transcription-free qualitative data and cost-free questionnaire software; a continued blurring of public and private as personal data is shared on the web; and the opportunity to explore identity, social interaction and meaning making, all key issues for qualitative psychologists. In this context *The Psychologist* brought us together at the University of West of England as five qualitative psychologists experienced in digital research to discuss our views on the opportunities and challenges of doing online and digital

research (see box). The discussion started with a question on distinctions between 'digital methods' and researching the 'digital world'.

## Researching the digital world

The digital realm is embedded in many people's everyday lives, both for our research participants and for us as researchers. Digital television, mobile technology with constant internet access, GPS and high-quality audio and video technologies have transformed social media platforms and practices. Apps and websites digitally link pre-internet media such as magazines, interviews are conducted with digital recorders, and reading groups held on Skype. Expanding 'smart' technology connects our material and embodied world to the internet, from fridges to heart-rate monitors. Increasingly sophisticated algorithms enable extensive data mining, such that users' identities and online practices have become commercial products (Beer, 2009; Bucher, 2012; Fuchs, 2014). All of this makes distinctions between the 'on-' and 'offline' world increasingly irrelevant.

A key challenge for researchers then is how to understand and analyse this complexity. Close collaborations across and between disciplines are required, linking psychology with computer science, sociology, cultural studies and media studies (see for example, van Dijck, 2013). There is a strong tradition of this type of close interdisciplinary collaboration in qualitative psychology. Qualitative psychologists are well placed to offer the deep levels of analysis and the contextualisation of meaning and experience that is required when researching the digital world.

From this perspective, qualitative research offers a vital contribution to research in the era of 'big data'. For example, sentiment analysis identifying patterns of 'likes' related to a particular topic or set of topics can give us a valuable understanding of how specific 'targets' are linked on social media. But

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## Watch the discussion

This article stemmed from a roundtable discussion which *The Psychologist* facilitated at the University of West of England. The participants, and authors of this article, were Sarah Riley (Reader in Psychology at Aberystwyth University), Adrienne Evans (Senior Lecturer at Coventry University), Christine Griffin (Professor of Psychology, University of Bath), Yvette Morey (Research Fellow at the University of West of England) and Helen Murphy (Principal Lecturer in the School of Psychology, University of East London).

A video of the discussion accompanies this article on our website. Thanks to Adam Teighe for his work on editing the piece.

there are significant gaps in this knowledge, notably how such online practices operate in specific social, economic and cultural contexts, what such connections mean to people, and how they are embedded in everyday lives.

The gaps in our understanding of online practices are not addressed by an adherence to orthodox approaches. For example, research on Facebook has taken known psychological facets (e.g. attachment theory, addiction and personality) and framed them over/on a digital platform without considering their appropriateness or usefulness in understanding and recording online social practices (see for example, Hart et al., 2015; Suissa, 2015; Wang et al., 2015). We argue that there is a need to think a bit deeper and harder, challenging ourselves as psychologists to consider the complexity of human practice that may be reproduced across on- and offline contexts or that may be significantly altered by being played out over multiplatform digital business products. For example, analyses of online embodiment show complex issues to hand, which sometimes produce exaggerated sociocultural norms (e.g. in relation to breast or penis size on dating websites: Waskul et al., 2000), and at other times playfully inverting them (e.g. the normalising of 'gender bending' avatars: see MacCallum-Stewart, 2008).

Digital participation can challenge norms and allow new contradictory senses of self to emerge. Facebook's original 'one to many' identity presentation challenged the everyday multiplicity of identities, whereas the diffused and fractured representations of a person produced through participation on the internet fundamentally challenged the notion of a coherent self (Gergen, 2000; van Dijck, 2013). Such complexity means that while the possibilities offered by new digital tools and platforms are considerable, care must be taken to avoid engaging in short-sighted ways that are ineffective or that neglect longstanding research issues. For example, researchers have raised concern over the rush to develop apps for a range of health and psychological needs that often fail to engage with the complexity of behaviours such as self-harm or significant life events such as pregnancy (Ferreday, 2010; Riley et al., in press). These moves are also criticised for focusing on individual responsibility while overlooking the social, cultural, commercial and political dimensions of digital technology (Lupton, 2014).

The huge amount of material that is publicly available online is seductive. It lures us into studying online texts, but we will have limited understanding if we do not also try to understand how they are embedded into people's everyday lives, in

terms of psychological processes, social practices and the wider context in which people are located. In considering the wider context of digital practices, in-depth qualitative research draws attention to the way the digital realm is 'embodied' and 'embedded' (Hine, 2015), providing accounts that are absent in traditional quantitative 'big data' approaches. A focus on context also allows us to examine the role of the underlying infrastructure on participants' communication practices and the experience of being networked. For example, Beer's (2009) examination of ways in which networked data circulates and operates through the filtering of information by search algorithms highlights the importance of a focus on the affordances of the platform as well as participants' communication practices (see also Boyd, 2010; Bucher, 2012). Other qualitative work has helped us theorise affect and how the internet creates new ways of feeling connected to others (Ferreday, 2009).

In the era of big data qualitative psychology has a major contribution to make, offering an understanding of the meanings behind the click and locating these at the interrelations of the embodied, material, subjective, affective, technological and political, so that we can explore the complexity of the networked-human experience. Combining the benefits of quantitative big data analysis

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with qualitative approaches requires a multimethod as well as an interdisciplinary approach. For example, the sophisticated statistical techniques of social network analysis that provide a snapshot of existing ties within a network can be combined with qualitative approaches (e.g. walking interviews, diaries of communicative practices, participatory mapping) that focus on the lived experience of social networks and the meanings that ties have (Edwards, 2010). This and other qualitative methods also allow the analysis of changes over time (Hine, 2015).

Our celebrations of the qualitative contribution in the era of big data are, however, somewhat tempered as we considered two forces likely to reduce the impact and value of qualitative research: a fetishisation of quantification as a fast way of mapping large-scale human behaviour and conversely, how qualitative research is 'labour intensive in a way that big data approaches are not [and] requires spending time with people online and offline, working out how the various aspects of their lives fit together and how the Internet makes sense for them' (see [tinyurl.com/n7fdogc](http://tinyurl.com/n7fdogc)). Now is the time to challenge the pervasive assumption that research on 'big data' must only be quantitative. Qualitative research has a great deal to offer in complementing and extending existing research in this area.

### Old dogs with new tricks?

It remains the case that the choice of research methods should always be dictated by the research question. We also recognise the value of a range of new research methods for studying the digital world and how it operates, not only at a technological level but also in terms of particular topics or communities who are associated with online practices. But we need to be careful not to get swallowed up in the enthusiasm for digital methods and engage in 'digital methodolatry', overlooking existing methods that are able to engage with complex issues for

the lure of the new and untested.

Digital methods often have antecedents in earlier research, such as ethnography, meaning that researchers need to perform a fine balancing act between not innovating for innovation's sake but equally not employing traditional methods in an insensitive way. An example of the latter is evident in 'personality' research on Facebook and other social networking sites that assumes core definable 'traits' as though these are relatively stable across and within the lived experience of the digital world (e.g. DeWall et al., 2011; Weisbuch et al., 2009). The challenge for digital researchers, then, is finding methods that can map complexity, including: participation on interconnected social media platforms, communication across on- and offline spaces, and content that is visual, textual, embodied and material. This is as likely to draw from visual sociology and digital ethnography as it is from qualitative textual analyses or quantitative mapping and counting techniques.

We are also interested in what online communication can do to 'traditional' methods, especially in terms of space and time. The ability to conduct research interviews over Skype is not just a convenience but can facilitate important shifts in communication. For example, the participant in a cross-national bridal study who started the online interview saying that wedding objects weren't important, slowly filled the room with her wedding album, decorations, gifts, and dress, which then became digital objects through the medium of Skype (see Broekhuizen & Evans 2014). Similarly, digital technologies allow us to visualise, archive and disseminate in ways that are more difficult to do with offline pen-and-paper methods.

### Ethics guidelines – up to the job?

In 2013 the British Psychological Society released a new set of guidelines called *Ethics Guidelines for Internet-Mediated*

*Research* ([tinyurl.com/bpsimr13](http://tinyurl.com/bpsimr13)). Previous guidelines were based on earlier iterations of the internet and were not equipped for the messiness and complexity of notions around public and private, authorship, and ownership on the participatory web. The new guidelines are reassuring in that they acknowledge many of these issues and try to deal with them in a context-appropriate way. Acknowledging the fact that many people still perceive their content to be private, even when it is 'public', the guidelines come down on the side of caution with regard to obtaining valid consent and ensuring confidentiality and anonymity.

Given how 'sticky' and searchable content is, it makes sense that even data collected unobtrusively from social networking or social media sites can harm unwitting participants when published and disseminated. There is also the question of balance between the benefits of gaining an understanding of a community or behaviour and driving said community and its associated content underground (Morey et al., 2014). Not only may individual participants be emotionally and reputationally harmed, but social groups and communities may be threatened by new or increased scrutiny. For example, members of self-harm and pro-ED sites continually change key terms to avoid detection by search algorithms which may result in regulation or blocking by ISPs or platform providers.

But even with the new recommendations, getting the balance right is difficult. Conducting ethical research through dialogue between participants and researchers that acknowledges inequalities and power differentials (e.g. see 2013's New Brunswick Declaration: [tinyurl.com/qy8hf74](http://tinyurl.com/qy8hf74)) is difficult and sometimes, impossible, in the digital research world. For example, trying to obtain valid consent to use an image that has been reblogged or re-circulated hundreds of thousands of times, is impractical if not impossible. Obtaining valid consent from big platform providers

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(e.g. Facebook), which are motivated by commercial interests and increasingly moving towards becoming the gatekeepers and owners of the data they host, is a further complicating factor (Fuchs, 2010, 2014). To deal with such complexities, psychologists involved in qualitative research in online contexts have argued that research ethics committees need to include researchers with expertise in this field (Rodham & Gavin, 2010).

### What are the 'hot' topics?

It's clear that the internet facilitates a blurring of public and private in a way that has significant implications for psychology. Living life publicly online and through digital technology is a requirement to socially 'exist' for many people now (Fuchs, 2014), and this opens up new possibilities and associated new challenges. For example, platforms such as Facebook, Flickr, Tumblr, Snapchat, etc. offer the opportunity for people to creatively produce and share representations of themselves across time (Hodkinson & Lincoln, 2008). The corollary of this public sharing is that people are vulnerable to intense public critique, past transgressions remain permanently exposed, bullies can no longer be left at the school gate, and the promise of a 'digital revolution' that overcomes difference seems a hope from a bygone age as trolls threaten rape for having an opinion. See, for example, Laurie Penny as one of many examples of women reporting this kind of behaviour – [tinyurl.com/dxvg5p3](http://tinyurl.com/dxvg5p3); and Nakamura's (2000) analyses of language in cyberspace as the homogenisation of straight, white male assumptions.

Digital media has also intensified a life lived out through the imagined presence of the other and contributed to our surveillance culture. Try this as an

activity: there is an app that will track your loved one giving you their map coordinates in real time. If you didn't know this already you may have had an affective response: perhaps shock at the personal invasion, or amusement at the thought of technologically afforded arguments between couples. What you're responding to is surveillance. Now think about a time when it would have been handy to have got hold of someone close to you, maybe the anxiety of not knowing where they were or frustration of looking for them in a large shopping centre. Perhaps the app now seems quite useful?

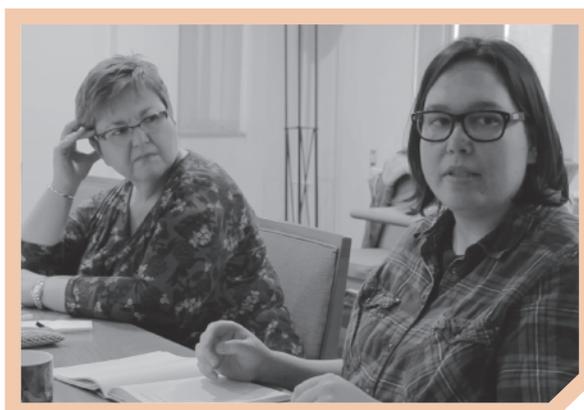
There is a need then for psychological research exploring the personal experience of being networked. For while 'the networked self' has been discussed by internet researchers such as Boyd (2010); psychologists' voices have been relatively absent on this issue (with some exceptions, for instance Vasalou and

algorithms (Bucher, 2012). Equally our emotional connections to online-ness is an issue that will become increasingly important (Karatzogianni & Kuntsman, 2012).

We also need to place our participants' online practices within their sociopolitical context. For us this means considering neoliberal regimes of governance that construct ideal subjectivity in terms of a 'choiceful' subject, who is individually responsible for their actions and social practice and who employs consumer practices to transform themselves into their ideal self in a rational and autonomous way (for recent analyses, see for example, Evans & Riley, 2014; Hall, 2011). Neoliberalism is implicated in the production of a judgemental culture, where structural inequalities, such as those around gender, class and ethnicity, are masked under the 'you can do it if you want it hard enough' rhetoric of individualism (Griffin et al., 2013).

Online interactions are classed, radicalised, gendered, sexualised and embodied (e.g. Nakamura 2000, 2011). We can build on this work to explore differences in 'digital agency', examining how the production of new technologies forms part of new forms of labour, a 'factory without walls', shared on a global scale and structured by gender, class and ethnicity (Evans & Riley, in press; Gill & Pratt, 2008; Gregg, 2010). New research needs to take account of both the global inequalities of the production of digital content (can we speak of the 'digital sweat shop?') as well as the emotional labour involved in the blurring of social and working practices, when so much of work-life practice take place through the 'network'.

We have argued above for an analysis of identity, social interaction and meaning making contextualised within its sociocultural, technological, political and economic context. From this standpoint, digital research has little changed our research imperatives or questions. But the pace of technological change, the increasing embeddedness of the digital, and the consequent generation of an unprecedented volume and speed of potential data, mean that we are now in a position to know both more and less about ourselves than ever. What's needed is a balanced approach that acknowledges the broad knowing that accompanies big data, while reaffirming the deeper knowing that comes with thick data. It's this complicated messiness of people that qualitative researchers like best.



Joinson, 2009, who examine the intersections between technology, behaviour, and the self). Where psychologists have contributed is in exploring the complexity of impression management on Facebook, the possibilities and anxieties social media affords for social interaction (Clerkin et al., 2013; Forest & Wood, 2012). There is room to develop this research. For example, much of the work on the creation of youth-generated content on social media considers such content in isolation of the platforms that allow for its creation, curation and communication.

Future research needs to include analysis of the particular features or affordances of digital platforms – such as social media sites – in order to understand the ways in which they amplify and extend individual and social identities online and unobtrusively advertise through data gleaned from demographic information and taste-preference

addictive behaviors. *Addictive Behaviors*, 42, 32–35.

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