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Virtual Fieldwork: A Review of The Internet: Understanding Qualitative Research

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Abstract

In this brief and thoughtful book, Hine (2013) attempts to "help with the process of writing up qualitative Internet research" (p. 2). First acknowledging that the Internet is "a new field of study" whose quality is still being worked out, she makes a strong case for the Internet as virtual fieldwork. Hine (2013) avoids repeating information that may be found in larger textbooks dealing with qualitative research, but she raises valuable ethical questions, presents an itemized summary of key components of qualitative Internet writing, and suggests specific ways by which we can evaluate qualitative Internet research. The final chapter serves as a condensed annotated bibliography.

Keywords

Internet as Fieldwork, Writing up Research, Qualitative Internet Research

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Virtual Fieldwork: A Review of The Internet: Understanding Qualitative Research

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In this brief and thoughtful book, Hine (2013) attempts to "help with the process of writing up qualitative Internet research" (p. 2). First acknowledging that the Internet is "a new field of study" whose quality is still being worked out, she makes a strong case for the Internet as virtual fieldwork. Hine (2013) avoids repeating information that may be found in larger textbooks dealing with qualitative research, but she raises valuable ethical questions, presents an itemized summary of key components of qualitative Internet writing, and suggests specific ways by which we can evaluate qualitative Internet research. The final chapter serves as a condensed annotated bibliography. Keywords: Internet as Fieldwork, Writing up Research, Qualitative Internet Research

This portable book by Christine Hine (2013) is one of fourteen works in Oxford's *Understanding Qualitative Research* series. Hine's case for the Internet as a space for fieldwork is timely, particularly in the so-called "Post-Truth Era." Her approach throughout the book consists of insight from experience and presentation of practical skills. For such a small book (147 pages), *The Internet* is packed with very helpful resources and ideas, mostly stemming from Hine's own work. In short, Hine (2013) attempts to "help with the process of writing up qualitative Internet research" (p. 2).

The Internet is "a new field of study" whose quality is still being worked out, but it is valuable fieldwork for qualitative inquiry. Hine (2013) writes, "Whether we analyze documents we find on the Internet, observe interactions that happen in online spaces, or carry out interviews via e-mail and instant messaging, we can be carrying out meaningful, mainstream qualitative research" (p. 3). Further, she makes the distinction between the Internet as a tool and the Internet as a subject of study. Though it is presently a fledgling area of inquiry, qualitative Internet research has already contributed to the understanding of how our lives are impacted by online activity. For example, one researcher I recently met offers insightful strategies for improving youth Internet safety (Fisk, 2014, 2016). As a graduate student in Adult Education, I found this book particularly helpful for increasing my confidence in conducting online research on non-formal education.

Hine (2013) also connects the task of studying lives with the Internet and suggests that the connection is "unavoidable" due to the ubiquitous nature of online activity. But, the book argues, it offers unprecedented ease for collaboration. She writes, "The Internet offers the possibility of expanding the process of writing the qualitative research text…" (p. 15). Indeed, the ability to have a virtually centralized work space, such as a Wiki, allows a project to be open for contributions from participants and other researchers. Due to the brief nature of the book, she avoids repeating information that may be found in larger textbooks dealing with qualitative research. Still, the content is useful for both novice and experienced qualitative researchers. Hine's (2013) sparse use of footnotes is helpful, since she defines various terms such as "Microblog," "podcast," and "Facebook."

Overall, the book flows logically; Hine (2013) builds a case for conducting Internet research, then describes how to plan, report, and analyze the data. Moreover, Hine's writing is clear, and she avoids jargon when possible. Another helpful aspect of Hine's (2013) writing is that at the end of every chapter she gives a wrap-up paragraph that reviews what she covered,

and which leads the reader into the following chapter. One issue I found particularly interesting is Hine's (2013) discussion of "online" versus "hybrid" research, since those of us who use the Internet daily rarely consider those differences. Further, her presentation of "active interaction" compared to "unobtrusive" methods is very helpful for the new or expert qualitative researcher. Hine (2013) also informs readers of different uses for field notes, transcripts, and screenshots.

While Hine (2013) assumes that the reader approaches this text with some qualitative analysis background and an understanding of different writing styles, she provides review questions for the development of one's research proposal institutional review board (pp. 49-50). Of note is how she makes a distinction between scientific research reporting and qualitative research reports, which have a "freer approach to format, but in fact contain many similar elements" (p. 56). She also raises some valuable ethical questions to consider and suggests that the Internet's ease of access does not make any research project ethical. Regarding Internet research ethics, Hine (2013) specifically discusses anonymity and confidentiality—two critical components of Internet research. Since research in the Internet is essentially based on "self-transcribing" interactions (p. 69), objectivity is a challenge which is why, according to Hine (2013), reflexivity becomes critically important to the qualitative Internet researcher.

Dynamics that I would have overlooked are the "temporal aspects" of being online, which Hine (2013) concisely discusses (p. 83). *The Internet* covers traditional qualitative research writing, but it also introduces "innovative analysis" in Chapter 4. I learned about adding visual data, using Google Maps/Google Earth, and "digital supplement" components to textual narratives (p. 101). Chapter 4 also offers a very helpful itemized list of ideas for "innovative analysis and reporting" (pp. 109-115).

I appreciate how broadly Hine considers qualitative Internet research and the Internet's impact on future generations. In Chapter 5, she offers specific ways by which we can evaluate qualitative Internet research. The book ends with a brief, thoughtful, and relevant annotated bibliography. Hine's (2013) succinct presentation of the Internet as a space within which to conduct research and as a subject *on which* to conduct research was particularly helpful for me as I consider methods for my own work; fellow graduate students may appreciate *The Internet* for the same reason. Further, Hine's (2013) rationale for online research serves as encouragement for more seasoned qualitative researchers who are considering virtual fieldwork as a new direction in their research agenda.

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