Friedman, K. (2003). Book review: 'Internet communication and qualitative research: a handbook for researching online', by Chris Mann and Fiona Stewart


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This handbook provides a generous and comprehensive overview of qualitative research on the Internet.

After defining terms and discussing the general field of Internet research, the authors take the reader through the central issues of practical research using computer-mediated communication.

The third chapter provides an ethical framework for online research. This is particularly important in two key ways. One is the thorough and careful discussion of research ethics specific to the Internet. The other is the larger question of research ethics in general. Many of these topics apply to all forms of qualitative research and to some forms of quantitative research where human beings are involved. For this reason, this chapter offers a valuable contribution to any training program in design research.

The core of the book addresses the practical details of online research. This includes an introduction and overview of online research methods, a detailed discussion of online focus groups, and a thoughtful analysis of online interviews. The authors devote a full chapter to power issues, including gender, power relations, and privacy. They give an equally important chapter to language mode and analysis, with attention to computer-mediated communication as a hybrid communication medium. This leads to a discussion of the problems of computer-mediated communication as a research mode, and a consideration of implications for data analysis.

The two final chapters will be particularly interesting for anyone who plans to use on-line research methods in the design fields. The first involves virtuality. Design research is now a global enterprise, spanning many cultures and linking colleagues in dozens of remote locations. The developments of exciting new research collaborations raise important issues. One of these is the fact that we must
resolve communication and cultural differences, building on them and occasionally being separated by them as we work together. The value of computer-mediated communication becomes clearer as we are increasingly required to clarify issues and render tacit knowledge explicit. The problems are equally great. It is difficult to communicate completely in text, or even with text and collaborative web sites. This means that any online research involves a number of important issues including attention to identity, disembodiment, and an understanding of how these affect research.

This leads to a second, important challenge. Design research often involves working with physical artifacts and physical engagement with embodied human beings. This is even sometimes true of digital artifacts: even though these artifacts can be communicated through computers, the people who use them inhabit the physical world.

After a fine conclusion on future directions, the book provides a useful glossary and appendices with online consent forms, sample email text-based survey forms, and a web-page-based survey.

Only a few years ago, online research involved so few scholars that one editor alone was able to publish much of the best work done in three books (Jones 1995, 1997, 1998). Within the last few years, Internet research has grown to the point where there is now an Association of Internet Researchers (AOIR 2003) and the robust Encyclopedia of New Media (Jones 2002).

Chris Mann and Fiona Stewart have made an admirable contribution to the field. Their work will also serve the needs of the increasing number of design research scholars and professionals who use online methods in their work-
References


