

## BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

**Salmons, Janet E.**, *Doing Qualitative Research Online*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc., 2016. 240 pp., \$46.00 paper (978-1-4462-9541-0)

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**A**s the internet becomes more integral to all aspects of our lives, social scientists continue to grapple with its potential for our research endeavors. While many senior scholars and practitioners learned to do research without the internet or even without computers, students and new colleagues come to research as digital natives who are often quite comfortable with online settings and activities. Salmons, an independent researcher, writer and consultant who specializes in online communities, entrepreneurship and leadership in the digital age, is attempting to bridge the gap between qualitative methods before and after the internet. Her previous books, *Online Interviews in Real Time* (Sage, 2010), *Cases in Online Interview Research* (Sage, 2012) and *Qualitative Online Interviews* (Sage, 2015), demonstrate her sustained interest in the possibilities of our new digital age.

In *Doing Qualitative Research Online*, Salmons carefully outlines the questions and details researchers need to attend to in designing their online research [e.g., aligning purpose and design, choice of extant, elicited, and enacted data, selecting ITC, addressing ethical issues, sampling, etc.]. She utilizes her concept of “Qualitative e-Research Framework” (Salmon 2012) to organize the eleven chapters and provide a ‘road map’ throughout the text. Salmon provides an overview of the methodologies, methods and ethics for doing qualitative research online, and explores three types of online data collection—extant, elicited, and enacted. Early on, she argues that researchers should not just “repurpose real-world data collection techniques” for a virtual world, but should instead employ digital approaches that make use of “text-based exchanges (messaging, email), multi-channel meeting spaces (e.g. Adobe Connect, WebEx), video-conferencing (full video with multiple participants) or video calls (e.g. Skype, Google Chat) or immersive virtual worlds (e.g. Second Life, games) [which] are fundamentally different from real-world, co-located interviews and observations” (xiii).

Distinguishing between the internet as the subject of research versus a platform or setting to conduct research, Salmon provides a general overview of new online possibilities for expedient and convenient studies. However, throughout the text, Salmon stays at a general level and topics are discussed in a broad, nonspecific manner. For example, in attempting to address what she identifies as the most often mentioned criticism of online research “you miss the non-verbal cues” (46), Salmon counters with a discussion of non-verbal communication that can be identified in chat or text messages and advises the use of videoconferencing or web conferencing tools to allow for “robust non-verbal cues” (46). However, an additional concern for how a researcher might validate the identity of the participants—are they who they say they are—is not even mentioned. For researchers looking at interactions online, an understanding of who the participants are is crucial to appropriately interpreting the data. Further, the book provides a limited number of examples of online studies conducted, or technologies used, with the reader often being directed to the companion website for these. However, very few examples were found in the website’s public section—perhaps there are more in the password-protected sections. Examples embedded within the text could have grounded the discussion and been more helpful for individuals trying to understand how online possibilities have been utilized, and how they might be harnessed for their own work.

An unstated challenge that Salmon seems to have set for herself was to write a book that was discipline free—a discussion of methodological practices that could theoretically be used by anyone from business to education to marketing to sociology and beyond. The result is a text focused solely on methodological concerns without any specific theoretical or epistemological grounding, and few examples of online studies. Though Salmon mentions the need for researchers to have a clear underpinning of such for their research design (and offers a brief discussion of various epistemological traditions), she does not tie her discussion to any tradition. For many sociologists, myself included, who believe our methods are inextricably tied to our disciplinary understandings of social life (e.g. symbolic interactionism), which dictates very a nuanced relationship between *what* we study and *how* we study it, Salmon’s approach is rather disconcerting. Indeed, modern day qualitative methods, stemming from early anthropological work and the early twentieth century endeavors of the Chicago School, were developed to address specific social questions that draw from as well as enhance and inform our theoretical

understandings of social life. Thus, unintentionally, *Doing Qualitative Research Online* could give the impression of a “have methods will travel” approach that research skills can be a separate, standalone skill base.

The lack of a disciplinary grounding is most striking in the last two chapters. In ‘Organizing, analyzing and interpreting data’ the reader is quickly told “a comprehensive explanation of this important area of the research process is outside the scope of this chapter” (161) and directed to other books listed in an appendix. Thus, important issues regarding data analysis are glossed over and readers are directed elsewhere for “detailed steps” (165). Further, without a specific theoretical underpinning, analyzing qualitative data in a meaningful way is difficult, and may lead to researchers confusing accounts with facts, or worse—reporting narrative soundbites devoid of their social context. In the final chapter ‘Writing, Reporting and Contributing to the Literature,’ Salmon raises a number of important reflection questions for researchers to evaluate their work as a means to approach writing. However, because her discussion is so general, the reader is left with no real sense of how to write a qualitative report, article, or book, limiting the book’s usefulness for students or novice researchers.

In summary, Salmon raises a number of useful questions and concepts for novice researchers to contemplate, and provides a good overview of modalities and typology of data one might collect online. Though she sparks an important and timely conversation—how will social researchers conduct online studies?—given the book’s lack of examples, missing disciplinary grounding, and overall approach, it is not recommended as a primary text for undergraduate qualitative courses. Graduate students and scholars unfamiliar with online research could find it helpful in identifying the various decisions needed to design and conduct an online study, though they would likely need to also consult more focused, theoretically-informed texts with examples from the literature as well.

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