

The Internet as research tool

Description

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Good research draws on evidence â?? at the very least a body of literature that supports the answer to a research question. Can you draw on the Internet for evidence?

As well as a body of literature most researchers would admit as evidence the results of experiments, observations, surveys, interviews, and questionnaires. In architecture, the arts and some other fields (engineering, computing) itâ??s common to treat the processes of designing, composing (music) and making (poesis) as further sources of evidence.

In hard core humanities research evidence often resides in an *archive* â?? a formally catalogued or indexed collection of data as found in a records office (e.g. births, deaths and marriages), library, or museum, or an uncollated box of random papers in someoneâ??s attic or under a bed.

An archive might also include materials other than documents, such as artworks, memorabilia, furniture, photographs, trinkets, bus tickets, old cassette tapes and ephemera. Sifting through *stuff* can have the character of search and detective work, but itâ??s also creative. Archives get sorted, made and curated as well as probed â?? thatâ??s research.

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Online reluctants

So how does the Internet and all it offers feature in the search, creation and/or curating of research evidence? Clearly, there are indispensable online repositories â?? journal services, library materials, image stores, encyclopaedias and databases that extend and amplify enormously the resources that were available to researchers before the Internet. There is also the specialised field of data mining, and of course online survey and measuring tools, and tools for engaging with stakeholders, participants, and audiences â?? where research and â??pathways to impactâ?• converge. But what about all that informally delivered online content? Is that of any use to researchers?

Iâ??ve picked up a reluctance amongst research students to use the Internet in research, that perhaps reflects my own suspicions of the medium. After all, the online world is so available, containing the authoritative mixed in with the unmoderated, with altruism and commerce, information and misinformation, popular sentiment and serious news, entertainment and art. It reflects life after all.

Some cases

Here are some example research projects of differing scales using the Internet. Letâ??s assume that the research takes place in the context of appropriate ethics approval protocols, respects intellectual property and exercises discretion in identifying authors and content. The cases reflect my own interest in digital media, art and architecture. Are these valid modes of research?

1. Videos. Sandra is researching the impact of film on perceptions of the urban environment, acknowledging that many tourists and other amateur urban photographers gravitate to sites that are popular film settings. She wants to find out how that influences their picture taking, and in turn their perceptions of a city. As part of her research she targets YouTube, Vimeo and Vine to uncover representative examples of amateur videos. She documents the quantity and quality of what sheâ??s found, placing the videos in categories and extracts from them some generalised understandings of how people represent the city. She watches and documents over 30 hours of publicly available videos.

2. Media bias. Ken is interested in how news reporting differs between countries that boast a free press and those with state controlled media, conjecturing that citizen journalism provides an avenue for people to surreptitiously avoid state censorship. As well as exploring the literature on the topic he searches online to identify three controversial events and examines social media feeds to scrutinise how groups of citizens in different countries report on and interpret these events. He doesnâ??t have access to data mining software, and in any case prefers to conduct qualitative content analysis of selected feeds in order to pick out subtle tactics in the way people express their views.

3. Fan fiction. Michael is interested in how Carl Jungâ??s psychological archetypes get worked out in fan fiction, a subversive form of fiction writing that appropriates and distorts characters and situations from classic fiction, e.g. the Harry Potter stories. So he selects some representative online fan fiction and subjects it to literary critique, acknowledging and respecting authorship.

4. Urban games. Helen is interested in the impact of video games on perceptions of the city. As part of her research she watches several hours of Letâ??s Play videos of popular computer games that take place in an urban setting. She also devises an observational protocol in which she watches and documents 12 game players in action. She also interviews each on their attitudes to the game and the city.

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5. Consumerism. Jen wants to identify how body stereotyping informs peopleâ??s life choices. She suspects there have been some major transitions over the past twenty years in how advertisers appeal to body stereotypes in order to sell product. As well as examining historical advertising material she searches the web for examples of banner adds, pop ups, targeted advertising, and â??1 tip-adsâ?• to construct a potent critique of body image businesses, and the consumerist cultures that support them.

â??One weird, old tipâ?•

In summary, the Internet provides a source of commentary, opinion, and attitudes. It provides indicators of peopleâ??s priorities, and what interests them. It also offers data on consumer culture, including commercial pressures and imperatives. It can be mined for evidence of tactics used in persuasion, propaganda, coercion, deception and oppression.

Itâ??s a medium that lays bare to the critical researcher the circulation of power, capital, dissent and anarchy. It reveals the narratives people construct, peopleâ??s interpretive practices, and the persistence of the old as well as speculations involving the new.

The Internet is not everything, nor is it the truth. It includes webbable, linkable knowledge, but thereâ??s other stuff outside its hyperlinked cloudiness. In that respect the Internet is also a source of counter-information, bringing into relief what people donâ??t yet care about, or to which they cannot give ready expression. It reveals gaps in our knowledge, and other grist for the researcherâ??s mill.



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Notes

- The first photograph was taken in a second hand shop in York. The second picture is an â??archiveâ?• of paintings of the Vilnius TV Tower by children, Lithuania, in an exhibition outside the Vilnius Museum of Genocide Victims.
- An article in the Independent claims that a viral meme about a dress provided the stimulus to a scientific research project.
- Search online for â??Internet Research Tool.â?• Also look on WikiPedia and Google Scholar.
- For a short article on the ethics of using the Internet in research see Harriman, Stephanie, and Jigisha Patel. 2014. The ethics and editorial challenges of internet-based research. *BMC Medicine*, (12) 124, doi:10.1186/s12916-12014-10124-12913. (available as open access)
- See a blog post by Mike Press on using iPads as a research tool.
- See a blog post by Salma Patel at LSE: Iâ??m an academic and desperately need an online presence, where do I start?

References

- Dorfman, Eric (ed.). 2012. *Intangible Natural Heritage: New Perspectives on Natural Objects*. New York: Routledge
- Markham, Annette N. 2011. Internet research. In David Silverman (ed.), *Qualitative Research*: 111-127. London: Sage. See earlier version online.

Category

1. Research related

Tags

1. advertising
2. archive
3. Internet
4. media
5. research

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