

Just Google it: Netnography in practice

Description

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Millennials laugh at Trumpâ??s claim this week that Google is biased â?? as it only turns up bad news about him (BBC). Some people still have difficulty mastering this basic life skill, to call up and interpret search engine results sensibly and knowingly.

Netnographic researchers have the skills. They gather data, information and evidence from the Internet, social media sites, message boards, blogs, and videos as well as comments and reviews left by users, consumers, players and readers. These raw traces of everyday online conversation are rich sources of opinion, attitudes and insights about life, place and social change, especially if researchers approach such data with cunning and skepticism â?? obliquely.

Consider Jennie Small and Candice Harrisâ??s 2014 article about consumersâ?? attitudes to air travel. In assembling a suitable evidence base, any researcher might interview and survey travellers, conduct field observations and focus groups, and examine air travel data.

But in their study, Small and Harris mined online data for attitudes and opinions of individuals who travel. How do you eavesdrop on nuggets of online conversation?

Living in confined spaces

Instead of searching online for air travel, families, attitudes, tourism, etc, they cleverly picked a topic (i) about which many travellers seem to hold strong opinions, (ii) for which there is likely to be a ready record of online discussions, and (iii) from which a researcher could infer evidence applicable beyond the search terms. So they searched for â??**Crying babies on planes**.â?•

The researchers examined over 1400 online reader statements from the comments fields of 6 news reports to gather insights about peopleâ??s attitudes to the management and control of small children in enclosed public spaces. But the study exposed other considerations of changing social practices. In their words, the researchers

> â??examined the â??micro-communityâ?? of an aeroplane and highlighted the sociality of that space. In the space of the aeroplane, wider hegemonic socio-cultural relations are resisted, contested or affirmed. The issues are ones of rights and responsibilities, inclusion/exclusion, and power and resistanceâ?• (39).

They revealed â??passengersâ?? attitudes toward air travel and others sharing the spaceâ?• (39). But the study also provided a means to â??critique the perceived parenting style of many modern parentsâ?• (39). The authors also indicated how they processed all this data, for which they emplyed Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough).



I think their study provides a good template for netnographic research. Their particular research is interesting as it uses Internet resources to study a phenomenon that ostensibly has nothing to do with the Internet (babies that cry on aeroplanes). Clearly, similar techniques can be used to study life online.

Reddit it

As for any data collection, the researcher needs to justify the approach taken, show who the data represents, consider the ethical uses of such data, and indicate the dataâ??s limits â?? as lobbyists, commercial interests, advertisers, political hacks, trolls, agitators, spies and subversives infiltrate the unregulated world of online discussion forums. See post: Weaponise!

Following this approach, here are some themes and idioms that might help the researcher burrow down into changing social norms â?? via reddit: phone users on trains; nose picking in cars; mobility scooters on curbs; loud teenagers; rowdy stag parties; pets in handbags; should I carry a knife; resist the deep state; living off grid; how to survive a breakup; walking at night; rooftopping for beginners; how to clean a bedroom; most boring jobs; win at all costs; my browser history.

Bibliography

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- Kozinets, Robert V. 2015. *Netnography: Redefined*. Los Angeles: Sage
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Category

1. Research related

Tags

1. critical discourse analysis
2. netnography

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