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The E-Interview

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Abstract: This paper builds on the authors' recent experience of interviewing by e-mail. It describes the principal characteristics of the "e-interview", as we term it, outlining the principal ways in which the e-interview differs from the more familiar method of face-to-face interviewing. Paying particular attention to issues relating to time, space and technology, the paper identifies the possible strengths and weaknesses of the e-interview. It discusses the potential of the e-interview as a research tool, perhaps as a complement to more established methods, and it aims to provide useful practical insights for researchers who might consider conducting e-interviews in the future.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

Computers have long been employed profitably by quantitative social researchers, but new information and communications technologies (ICT) have more recently opened up new opportunities for qualitative researchers too. Perhaps the most spectacular developments have been in the area of analysis software, with the appearance and subsequent advances of packages permitting researchers to organise and explore their typically rich data sets in increasingly sophisticated ways (see FIELDING & LEE 1991 for an early assessment). But ICT also have the potential to transform, or at least enhance, many other facets of the research process, including the initial acquisition of data (MANN & STEWART 2000). This paper builds on the authors' recent experience of supplementing a questionnaire survey and a series of face-to-face interviews with a small number of e-mail exchanges with research subjects—or "e-interviews", as we have chosen to term them. This is different from the "computer-assisted" interviewing that is sometimes used in structured face-to-face or telephone interviewing (BRYMAN 2001), where the computer is used to prompt the interviewer and record the answer in a form convenient for further processing. Rather, the technology is the means of communication between interviewer and interviewee. In theory this could take a number of forms—e.g. a focus group run in a chat room in real-time—but we will limit our discussion to a sequence of e-mails between one researcher and one research subject. [1]

Our own e-interviews were conducted as part of a project concerned with the coverage of ethics in the teaching of management accounting in higher education in the British Isles (BAMPTON & COWTON 2002a, 2002b), which itself was part of a larger programme of work concerned with accounting ethics. At the heart of the project on teaching was a postal questionnaire survey of management accounting lecturers, who were asked towards the end of the research instrument whether they would be willing to be interviewed in order to explore further some of the issues which might emerge from the survey. A process for selecting which willing respondents to interview was devised which took into account both substantive issues, such as the quality of a respondent's answers to less structured elements of the questions, and the more practical matter of geographical location. [2]

It was originally envisaged that all the interviews would be conducted face-to-face or, in the case of anyone who was a lengthy journey away and relatively isolated from other willing subjects, perhaps by telephone—both of which are well established methods of interviewing. However, research is frequently not a "straight march" from planning to execution (SANDELANDS 1993, p.378), for there are likely to be problems and frustrations, as well as unexpected occurrences of good fortune or serendipity (MARSHALL & ROSSMAN 1989), particularly in the data collection process (KULKA 1982). Such was the case here, with the idea of using e-mail coming from a respondent to the questionnaire survey who had been selected as a potential interviewee. It had proved difficult to arrange a mutually convenient time to conduct the interview in person and the possibility of conducting a telephone interview was considered. However, it was felt that there were several problems associated with a telephone interview, including the special arrangements needed to record the respondent's answers to open-ended questions (BURKE & MILLER 2001). The subject suggested that it would be more efficient to send the questions to him by e-mail, which was then developed into the idea of conducting an e-interview; rather than sending all the questions at once it was decided to make the process more interactive by sending some introductory questions and then responding to the replies with further questions. Initially, three questions were sent, the response to which was prompt and comprehensive. Altogether three separate lots of questions were sent and responses received over a period of seven days. [3]

The first interview was regarded as a success by both interviewer and interviewee—so much so that the interviewee commented in one e-mail: "The interview method seems to work well, maybe you could get a mini-paper out of it". This is our attempt to fulfil the commission given to us by our research subject! [4]

The aim of the paper is to discuss the potential of the e-interview as a research tool, describing some of its characteristics, advantages and limitations. We will concentrate on the semi-structured or unstructured interview, which BRYMAN (2001) refers to as the "qualitative" interview—as opposed to the structured or standardised interview which tends to be used in quantitative research. The e-interview shares many of the strengths and weaknesses of the face-to-face interview when compared with other research methods such as participant observation. There are many excellent discussions of the interview as a research method, and we will not rehearse the standard issues here (e.g. sampling, relationship between reported and actual behaviour). Instead, our discussion will concentrate on the ways in which the e-interview differs from the more familiar method of interviewing in person, thus highlighting its possible strengths and weaknesses. Where appropriate, we will make some reference to our own experience, though it should be acknowledged that this paper is more prompted by that experience than derived from it, for in the research project only three actual e-interviews were conducted. [5]

2. Transforming the Interview: On Time and Space

When compared with the face-to-face interview, the e-interview (as we have defined it) entails two types of displacement, relating to two fundamental dimensions of human experience. In relation to time, the interactions between interviewer and interviewee are likely to be asynchronous, with pauses of varying lengths between bursts of communication or "episodes"; while in terms of space, the relationship takes place "at a distance" through the medium of electronic, screen-based text. The principal ramifications of these displacements are discussed below. [6]

The asynchronicity of the e-interview has several consequences. There can be pauses in face-to-face interviews, of course, but in an e-interview the delay in interaction between researcher and subject can range from seconds (virtually real time) to hours or days. In our own research some of the replies came back surprisingly quickly, but the important thing is that the interviewee was not committed to replying promptly. In this lies one of the major benefits of the e-interview, in that busy subjects—and busy researchers, for that matter—do not have to identify a mutually convenient time to talk to each other. Nor do they each need to find a single chunk of time in which to complete the full interview, since as an interview—rather than something more akin to an e-mailed questionnaire—there should normally be more than one episode of question and answer. Indeed, such iterations are fundamental to the communication having the dialogic or conversational characteristics of a good interview. [7]

In permitting a lengthy delay between communications, an e-interview gives the interviewee time to construct a response to a particular question. For example, it provides an opportunity to find information which might be required, although the researcher then does not know what resources the interviewee has drawn upon when answering the question, which might be an item of interest (LEE 2000, p.118). (The same problem applies to postal questionnaires.) Asynchronicity also enables interviewees to reflect and then supply a considered reply. The time to consider their response might reduce the pressure felt by nervous interviewees, but on the other hand it also loses spontaneity—which can be the basis for the richness of data collected in some interviews. It is not unknown for a face-to-face interviewee to challenge the accuracy of a transcription when confronted with a record of what they said, and similarly in an e-interview they might carefully draft and re-draft a reply in order to convey the desired impression. However, loss of spontaneity is not inevitable, since in our limited experience some replies do come back quickly and often contain the kinds of spelling and grammatical errors which are typical of much e-mail communication (CRYSTAL 2001), suggesting that they have not been carefully reviewed and re-drafted. And in any case, a carefully considered, well-articulated, reflective reply is not necessarily less valid than a spontaneous one. Moreover, an ethical case can be made in some situations for allowing research subjects the opportunity to protect themselves from making injudicious comments. [8]

The possible reduction in spontaneity may be an advantage to researchers too, for it is not only interviewees who in face-to-face interviews sometimes speak or act in ways which, with hindsight, they would rather not have done. In an e-interview the interviewer can take time to respond to the developing dialogue. This might be particularly valuable when researching sensitive topics, where it might be important for the interviewer not to appear judgemental or censorious (LEE 1993). [9]

One of the practical problems which arises from awaiting a response from an interviewee, though, is that it is usually not clear what lies behind a given delay. It might be that the interviewee is busy or has not yet thought of an appropriate response, and a message will arrive in due course. On the other hand, it might be that there is a problem in the research process and the interviewee is unhappy about some aspect of the message received or is not going to respond at all. Of course, an interviewee may explicitly decline to answer a particular question, but on some occasions it might be the case that he or she has not made a conscious decision; the e-mail is in limbo, much like a neglected memo in a traditional in-tray. [10]

The uncertainty which arises from the flexibility in speed of response permitted by an e-interview can be a worrying and frustrating experience for the researcher. Perhaps, though, after a few days a reminder can be sent. A researcher might feel reluctant to do this, concerned that it might be perceived as putting unreasonable pressure on the research subject. The problem is that physical remoteness makes the situation very difficult to read. However, as with any socially delicate situation, a repertoire of suitable tactics and phrases appropriate to the research context and nature of the relationship can be developed. For example, a slightly re-phrased or amplified question might be sent, prefaced with a comment to the effect that the original was perhaps not worded as clearly as it might have been—which can sometimes be what the problem really is. An alternative is to post on a website, hyperlinked from all e-mails, a simple list of protocols, which might include one to the effect that because of the occasional unreliability of e-mail, any message not responded to will be re-issued after so many days in case it has been lost. Whatever the method chosen, the key is for the researcher to strike an appropriate balance between allowing the interviewee time to respond as they wish and maintaining the momentum of the dialogue. [11]

One of the ways of reducing the risk of the interview stalling is to make it easy for the interviewee to answer—subject, of course, to pursuing the aims of the research. In face-to-face interviewing it is generally poor practice to ask more than one question at a time unless it is a very small number of questions closely related to one overall theme. However, because an e-interview is text based, several questions can be posed at once. Nevertheless, there are risks in sending too many questions at once, particularly if they are not closely related. First, the appearance of several questions might appear daunting and thus discourage the interviewee from replying; and if the interviewee finds one question difficult to answer, there is a danger that they will delay their response or even fail to respond altogether, even though they might be willing to answer all the other questions. A second reason for limiting the number of questions is that e-mails tend to be short, supported by a widespread view from the earliest days of e-mailing that the body of the message should be entirely visible within a single screenview, without any need for scrolling (CRYSTAL 2001). If this convention is breached, the exchange will feel less like an e-mail conversation, with the loss of the benefits of informality that this medium tends to engender. It does not matter if the interviewee sends a long reply, but it might cause problems if the interviewer sent messages which were complicated or verbose. [12]

Rather then sending a large number of questions at once, other issues and emerging themes can be followed up in successive interview episodes. However, a balance has to be struck between putting too much into any one episode, which might lead to stalling, and having too many episodes, which might lead to interview "fatigue". The researcher does not want to become viewed as a nuisance. Too many episodes will also mean that the interview will take a long time to complete if responses are taking a significant time to arrive. However, this problem can be mitigated by running several interviews at the same time, which has the additional benefit of facilitating a degree of cross-fertilisation, with issues emerging from one e-interview being fed into the others. [13]

A further practical issue to address is determining when an interview is nearing its end. In a face-to-face interview the interviewer can usually sense when time is running out and adjust his or her approach to the discussion accordingly, ensuring that certain issues are tackled as a matter of priority. It is probably less easy to sense when an e-interviewee is wanting to finish, without their being explicit. However, there are some possible signs to read. For example, if responses are becoming slower, that might be indicative of waning interest—though that could be coincidental, or a change of topic might refresh the process. Similarly, a decline in the length and quality of responses could—in the absence of other explanations—be a sign of interviewee fatigue. [14]

Although we did not do so in our own e-interviews, it would perhaps be useful to establish some groundrules regarding the engagement. This could cover the length of the interview, as well as other issues such as confidentiality and reminders (mentioned above). This would parallel the common practice of agreeing the length of a face-to-face interview as part of the process of negotiating access. In face-to-face interviews, subjects are then often happy to let the interview run for longer when it actually takes place (SAUNDERS, LEWIS & THORNHILL 2000), but the knowledge of the time period originally allocated enables the researcher to plan the issues to cover as a priority. In the case of an e-interview, however, the definition of time is not obvious. Should it be a number of days or weeks, or should it be a number of iterations or episodes, for example? The former has the advantage of explicitness, but because of the variable time to respond, it says little about commitment to the interview process, which is likely to be a particular problem for the interviewer. The latter, on the other hand, gives the interviewer an idea of what might be available, but without further information about the nature of the content of episodes in the e-interview, the interviewee is left in the dark about the likely commitment involved. Perhaps it would be helpful, in the case of a semi-structured interview, at least to send the interviewee an indicative list of the issues to be addressed. [15]

The difficulty of discerning when an e-interview might be stalling or coming to an end is part of a general problem with the e-interview, namely the lack of tacit signs, which results from the physical separation of interviewer and interviewee. Although interviewing is largely a verbal process and much of the textbook advice focuses on how to word questions and record answers, body language and other non-verbal means of communication are important—and lost in the case of e-interviews. For example, "something like body language may indicate that the interviewee is becoming uneasy or anxious about a line of questioning" (BRYMAN 2001, p.319), and so it is easier to "rescue" an interview that has unexpectedly started to go wrong when face-to-face. In addition to body language and facial expressions, voice inflexions are also lost in an e-interview. This might matter some times more than others, but their loss is always to be regretted as it represents a diminution in the quality of the data gathering. As BRYMAN (2001, p.321) remarks, "Qualitative researchers are frequently interested not just in *what* people say but also in the *way* that they say it". Emoticons created from normal keyboard characters might be used to inject a degree of personality into e-mail (e.g. ":)" or "smiley" to indicate humour) or to clarify the way in which a given phrase should be interpreted. Nevertheless, while the knowledge and use of such methods is increasing, particularly through the spread of text messaging, it has to be acknowledged that the register or "bandwidth" (MANN & STEWART 2000) of an e-interview is severely restricted. Thus, although attempts can be made to overcome it, the dis-location of interviewer and interviewee in an e-interview reduces the richness of the messages that pass between them, opening up an increased possibility of both ignorance and real misunderstanding when compared with the face-to-face interview. [16]

However, there are some possible advantages of the separation inherent in an e-interview, which might relate either to researcher or to subject. For example, the interviewee might be protected from embarrassment by the physical absence of the interviewer, which could be of particular benefit when sensitive issues are being discussed (LEE 1993). The e-interview cannot be described as an unobtrusive method (LEE 2000), but it can be viewed as less intrusive than a face-to-face interview. As LEE (2000) notes, the lack of direct contact means that Internet methodologies generally permit a degree of anonymity, which has been associated with respondents being more likely to admit to socially undesirable behaviour. The degree of anonymity might range from a simple lack of visual contact to methods designed to shield the interviewee from identification. The latter raises the question of whether the person being interviewed is really who they are supposed to be. But this is a familiar problem with postal questionnaires (was it really the chief executive who responded?) and it might be possible to set up a "gatekeeper", for example a prison officer or chaplain if a convicted criminal is being interviewed. Although the text-based nature of e-mail might be expected to inhibit expression, the common use of unconventional phrasing and the presence of spelling mistakes and grammatical "errors" suggests a greater freedom in approach to this form of communication than, say, a conventional letter (CRYSTAL 2001). [17]

Similarly, the e-interview can protect the researcher by offering a degree of anonymity, perhaps through the adoption of an e-mail pseudonym (subject to ethical considerations) or "de-gendering" the interviewer by avoiding the use of forenames in e-mail addresses and signatures. Such protection might be desirable in research which would render the researcher vulnerable in some way. However, great care has to be taken to avoid inadvertent identification (MANN & STEWART 2000). The shield which e-mail can provide might also reduce bias stimulated by the appearance of the interviewer—too young, too old, etc.—although that does not prevent attributions from being made (MANN & STEWART 2000). Moreover, the degree of anonymity or protection offered by an e-interview offers the prospect of extending interview-based research to researchers who might otherwise consider themselves excluded—for example the shy, or non-native speaking researchers who do not feel comfortable in face-to-face interviews for linguistic or cultural reasons. [18]

The above examples cite particular types of research setting or researcher, but ICT will have an effect on the constraints of time, cost and distance faced by all researchers (LEE 2000). Reference was made earlier to the way in which the asynchronicity of the e-interview might permit a busy researcher to conduct research without finding substantial chunks of time. The pressure on time is relieved even more by obviating the need to travel to meet the interviewee, which can be very time consuming and a virtual impossibility for some researchers with other professional (e.g. teaching) or personal commitments. Travelling is also expensive, with a full programme of interviews lying beyond not only the time but also the financial resources of many would-be researchers. Thus e-interviewing might open up research possibilities to new cohorts of researchers. As LEE (2000, p.117) observes, Internet research in general "provides opportunities for researchers in remote, small-scale or resource-poor environments to access wider populations that might not generally be available to them". E-interviewing might open up new vistas even for well resourced researchers. Our three e-interviewees were all from the British Isles because that was the focus for the research project, but using e-mail could enable a sample to go worldwide. Language and culture might be a problem, of course, but physical distance and time zone differences are not. And the asynchronicity of the e-interview might mean that it is possible to interview in a foreign language even if the interviewer is insufficiently fluent for a face-to-face interview. It could also be particularly suitable for research students who wish to conduct research on their home countries while studying abroad; and they would labour under no cultural or linguistic difficulties, of course. [19]

To the resource benefits brought about by the opportunity to interview without travelling should be added one further resource benefit relating to e-interviews; they provide their own transcription as a natural by-product. This is no small matter, for the transcription of tape-recorded interviews is very time-consuming; BRYMAN (2001) recommends allowing five to six hours for every hour of speech. This not only saves a great deal of time but avoids transcription errors which can easily creep in, particularly if the recording is of poor quality. There will still be some work to be done, such as re-ordering the episodes, which read in reverse order if the e-mail reply function is used, and editing out things like right-pointing angle brackets inserted by the e-mail system to indicate a previous message. But the saving of time when compared with transcription is likely to be considerable, complementing the earlier, but continuing, advances in the use of computer programs for the efficient analysis of interview data. [20]

3. Discussion: Technology and Beyond

The previous section focused on the ways in which the e-interview can transform the experience of time and space which occurs in face-to-face interviews, with attendant consequences for the nature of the data collected and the resources consumed. In terms of time, the e-interview offers some significant benefits, although there are also some negative aspects. On the other hand, when it comes to issues relating to space, the e-interview scores less well because of the distancing of researcher and subject, although there are again some possible positive features. Brief reference was made to the technology which underpins the e-interview, for example towards the end when discussing transcription, but where technology offers new possibilities, it also tends to bring with it new problems and challenges. [21]

Some of the technological issues relate to exploiting its full potential, whereas others are associated with dealing with the possibility of its going wrong. Experienced interviewers are well aware of the possibility of tape recorders developing faults in face-to-face interviews. In the worst cases, this is not discovered until an attempt is being made to transcribe the interview. We know from our own experience that e-mail, too, entails technological risks. Partly because of the success of the first interview it was decided to carry out another two (all the others were conducted face-to-face). Unfortunately these were not as successful as the first, largely because of our university's e-mail system, which suffered from several breakdowns, one of which was for several days. This not only meant considerable delays in being able to send out our messages and delivery problems for interviewees, which undermined momentum and bred frustration, but also it took us into the summer vacation period, when both interviewees were unavailable for several weeks. The interviews were therefore not completed satisfactorily. Even worse, one interview record was lost when one of the university's e-mail servers developed a very serious fault. According to MANN and STEWART (2000, p.43), "[f]ileservers are always being backed up and these backups are stored for months, or even years". Unfortunately we found this not to be the case in our own experience. Catastrophic faults, though rare, do occur. We would therefore advise researchers not to rely solely on system backup. Rather than waiting for the interview to finish before saving it to disk for tidying up, it is a good idea to make a backup of the interview after each episode. Incidentally, we did contact the interviewee concerned, but he reported that he did not have a copy in his "Sent" box. Perhaps he had had enough of dealing with us by e-mail! [22]

To exploit technology to the full, there are skills to be acquired. Although we mentioned earlier that e-interviews might be a suitable method for researchers who, perhaps for reasons of personality or culture, find face-to-face interviewing difficult, that should not be taken to imply that e-interviews are easy. Just as traditional face-to-face interviewing requires the researcher to possess skills, which can be acquired by both training and experience, so there are skills involved in conducting successful e-interviews. We assume that academic readers, particularly of an on-line journal, are familiar with the basics of e-mail. However, it is probably a good idea to enhance one's knowledge of the use of e-mail through consulting guides (e.g. FLYNN & FLYNN 1998, LAMB & PEEK 1995, SHIMMIN 1997), even if their advice does not always agree. Chapter 4 of CRYSTAL's *Language and the Internet* (CRYSTAL 2001) also includes insights which any academic making serious use of e-mail is likely to find interesting. There are also more technical skills in terms of exploiting the full potential of the software. Many of these can be picked up from appropriate manuals, and some are mentioned by MANN and STEWART (2000), who also provide other useful advice for the "online interviewer". However, it is probably wise to wear any technical virtuosity lightly, so that interviewees are not intimidated or put off by feeling they are dealing with a "techie"—unless technical credentials are important in the research context! [23]

Finally, and certainly not least, it is not just how the technology functions in the hands of the researcher that is at issue. It is also the access to, and familiarity with, the technology on the part of potential research subjects. This is a familiar issue with regard to telephone interviews (although in many developed countries the problem is now arguably as much one of whether people are available as whether they have the technology). In particular, there is a danger that the sample of interviewees will be biased. However, this is not a problem in all research. First, some interview-based research is not aiming for a random sample from which to generalise findings. In the case of our own research the e-interviews were part of an attempt to explore some of the existing questionnaire findings in greater depth, for which face-to-face interviews were also used. Second, some relevant populations do have universal or near-universal access to the technology. Again, in the case of our own e-interviews we were dealing with research subjects from an academic environment where use of e-mail, while not homogeneous or uniformly liked, is near universal. And, of course, use of e-mail in the general population, and especially particular cohorts, is spreading all the time, particularly in developed countries. The potential for e-interviews is set to grow. [24]

4. Conclusion

"Nowadays, few areas of research, teaching or scholarship remain untouched by developments in information technology" (LEE 2000, p.115). The interview, long used by qualitative researchers, is no exception. Responding to the positive reaction of one of our research subjects we have sought to advance consideration of the use of interviewing by e-mail. Assuming a semi-structured or unstructured approach, we have compared the e-interview with the classic face-to-face qualitative interview. The principal advantages and disadvantages of the e-interview are that:

- it offers significant savings in terms of time and financial resources, particularly in relation to the elimination of the need to travel or to transcribe tapes;
- it opens up possibilities for interviewing research subjects who would ordinarily lie beyond the geographical or social reach of the researcher; and
- in some circumstances it might be more successful in accessing certain types of research data; but
- it provides a limited register for communication; and
- it is dependent on willing and competent access to reliable technology on the part of both researcher and subject. [25]

We would not wish to argue that the e-interview should replace the face-to-face interview, although we have identified and discussed how it might offer certain advantages and so stand alone as a research method on occasions. Moreover, it can also be used as a complementary method to the face-to-face interview. Complementarity can take two forms. First, some subjects might be interviewed face-to-face while others might be interviewed electronically, as we did in our own research. Second, as BRYMAN (2001) notes, in qualitative interviewing the interviewee may be interviewed on more than one or even several occasions. We suggest that some or all of the supplementary communications could be by e-mail, providing a means of following-up issues once the main interview(s), which established a relationship, have been conducted. There might also be circumstances where it will make sense for a telephone call to be initiated, just as co-authors of a paper sometimes meet face-to-face, sometimes communicate via e-mail and sometimes talk on the telephone. Thus the e-interview can be just one of the forms of interview used, and interviews themselves may complement (as in our project) or be complemented by other research methods such as questionnaires or participant observation. [26]

The e-interview may not be the most appropriate research method, or even a suitable one, in all circumstances, but as the use of e-mail becomes more widespread and more firmly embedded into social processes, we would hope to see the e-interview take its place as a valued option in the qualitative researcher's toolbox. We hope that this paper has gone some way towards realising that hope and has provided useful insights for researchers who might consider conducting e-interviews in the future. [27]

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