# 1 Introduction on Internet Research, Theory, and Practice: Perspectives from Ireland

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## 1.    Project context

In 2007 and 2008 we started our doctoral research, each with a specific topic, but all related to technology and the internet – in the fields of education, communications, and humanities. For two of us, the locus was twofold: we were researching particular spaces on the internet, linked to the everyday life of young people in Ireland. This geographical anchoring proved to be problematic: nowhere could we easily identify internet research from Ireland. We knew some scholars who were indeed researching areas related to the internet, but an overview was impossible to find. At the same time, another member of our group became involved in open access publishing.

Open access to research literature may simply be described as the practice of making scholarly materials or peer-reviewed articles available via the internet to anybody, anywhere. More specifically, it allows the democratisation of research and the distribution of knowledge to those who are not affiliated to universities or institutions, without any monetary barriers to overcome. The benefits of open access are invaluable not only for the readers but also for the writers. While the former may freely access the material to further explore the domain, facilitate collaboration, or merely broaden the extent of their knowledge, the latter, i.e., the authors of articles published under an open access model, will have the opportunity of reaching a larger population of

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potential readers, as well as increasing international recognition and visibility with respect to citations (Bernius, Hanauske, Dugall, & König, 2013).

This project started in January 2012 with a call for papers issued to all Irish third-level institutions. The sheer number of submissions received showed that there was indeed a thriving internet research community, albeit scattered and often unaware that others were also researching digital issues. The final collection is a snapshot of internet research on the island of Ireland and by publishing this collection of papers under the golden road approach – all texts going through a quality assurance process (blind-peer review) and being openly accessible online on the publisher's website –, our aim is to contribute to and freely diffuse internet research from Ireland to the world wide web.

## 2. What is internet research?

In September 2000, the newly-formed Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) held its first international conference, entitled "the State of the Interdiscipline", highlighting a new locus of research, and a "focus on the Internet as a distinct interdisciplinary field for research" (http://aoir.org/conferences/past/ir-1-2000/). Internet research was gradually established as a discipline, whose focus and/or locus is the internet (Rall, 2007). Within a decade, the internet became part of everyday life, and barriers between the "virtual" and the "real" were slowly eroded, leading to a seamless experience for most young people in Western societies of the 21st century. At the same time, the internet as a locus of research found its way in many traditional disciplines; however, internet research throws a different light on methodologies, and research strategies are not always easily transferred (Markham & Baym, 2009). The first section of this publication in particular highlights some of the issues which focus the attention of humanities researchers online, from textual practices to the ethics of research on the internet, and following chapters consider the specificities of the internet with regards to societal or educational practices. In each case, the researchers or practitioners are keenly aware of methodological and ethical issues inherent to internet research. They also all

have in common their relationship to a specific geographical space, whether they are based in Ireland and research universal issues, or research specifically Irish issues.

Although the internet has been heralded – and indeed also criticised – for creating new types of communities (Baym, 2010; Rheingold, 2000), it has also been proven to consolidate links within physical communities (Wellman, Quan-Haase, Boase, & Chen, 2003). In the words of Haythornwaite and Kendall (2010), "early on, the question was whether community could exist online; now the question may be whether it can exist without online" (p. 1086). Thus, the increasing seamlessness of online and offline life, and the strength of physical as well as virtual communities led us to this volume, where physical geography and local issues meet internet research in the humanities and social sciences.

## 3. Humanities and social sciences, and interdisciplinary research

In internet research more than anywhere else, humanities and social sciences meet and meld to help investigate areas related to art, writing, and society. From its inception, the field has reflected the interdisciplinarity of its nature, and this volume illustrates this in its four separate sections. The first section entitled "Research and reflections on ethics and digital culture" is thus mostly concerned with theoretical issues, ethics and digital texts. The second section "Research and reflections on societal practices" observes how people behave and integrate new concepts and online technologies into their social practices, asking questions about gender, citizenship, friendship, work and privacy within daily life in Ireland. The third section labelled "Research and reflections on educational practices" focuses on learning and teaching methods in second and third level environments – from the presence of digital divide in secondary schools to the use of internet-based tools and platforms for language learning. In the final section named "Research and reflection on Irish resources", each chapter describes and analyses a specific digital resource within an Irish context.

## 3.1. Section 1 – Research and reflections on ethics and digital culture

Section 1 presents chapters dedicated to theoretical thinking and reflections linked to the emergence of humanities disciplines on the internet. One of the crucial issues to have arisen is that of which ethical guidelines and thinking to apply in a field which belongs both to humanities and social sciences traditions. *Heike Felzmann* outlines the main ethical concerns which have arisen in internet research, from the specific relationship between researchers, participants and the technology to expectations and requirements of privacy, and from confidentiality and anonymity issues to the assessment of vulnerability online. She then situates these concerns in an Irish context, reviewing existing Irish research ethics documents. *Cathy Fowley*'s chapter echoes these concerns and issues, whilst relating them to an ethnographic study of young Irish bloggers. She outlines the issues as well as the approaches and ethical solutions which can be found within the qualitative research tradition, examining in detail issues of privacy management amongst the participants in her study. While the first two chapters deal with aspects of ethics in internet research, the following three chapters are all concerned with textual aspects of humanities and the internet. *Jeneen Naji*'s chapter examines poetry in the digital medium, and she uses theories of translation in order to analyse the impact of the move from analogue to digital, as well as the impact of interactivity on the traditional characteristics of poetry. *Nina Shiel*'s chapter is also concerned with digital texts, and introduces the concept of ekphrasis to computer-generated graphics and their representation, with examples from social media, interactive fiction and electronic literature. *Noel Fitzpatrick*, for his part, is concerned with issues of digital reading, which he compares to prelectio, a pre-reading of texts for salient information. The concept of pharmakon is thus offered as a means of revisiting the technology of writing and positing a positive pharmacology.

## 3.2. Section 2 – Research and reflectionson societal practices

Through the means of semi-structured focus group discussions, *Jennifer Patterson*, in chapter 7, opens the section on societal aspects and explores

male adolescents' thoughts and opinions on the viewing of violent content in either fantasy worlds or real life. After reflecting on the meaning of the word violence, she examines whether violent media play a role in gender representation, and more specifically, whether violence can function as a model to affirming one's masculinity. *Claire English*, in the following chapter, presents findings from a qualitative study which analyses adults' use of online social media in discursive practices of citizenship. She investigates participants' attitudes towards posting and discussion, and explores whether online social media sites may act as online public spheres and create a space for rational debate. In a similar vein, *Angela Nagle* investigates public spheres and the online arena of political debate. Her focus, however, is placed on women's experience of online life, misogyny, and verbal abuse. Accompanied with shocking examples, she illustrates the situation of some female journalists and internet users and argues that, although a few women have started challenging the optimistic expectations of the cyberfeminists of the 90s, there is still a need for such a discourse. *Anne Rice*, on the other hand, claims that online, nowadays, we are all friends. She considers the outcomes of online friendship for young people with respect to social capital, i.e., resources individuals gather through their relationships. Discussing the benefits of friend bonding and friend linking, she illustrates how the traditional concept of youth friendship is evolving. *Gloria Macri*, in chapter 11, further discusses spaces for debate and bonding. She presents a case study of an online ethnography examining the development of an online Romanian community in Ireland. She investigates whether the online community represents the online dimension of the Romanian diaspora in Ireland, or whether it represents a community in its own right. In another area of research, *Michael Hynes* discusses and examines the environmental impact of one's carbon footprint when deciding to telework in Ireland. Gathering evidence from a multinational company, he analyses participants' self-reflection and self-assessment to estimate the environmental impact of teleworkers and argues for a need to develop enriched indicators. The final chapter in this section is a reflection on dataveillance, i.e., the subtle and pervasive surveillance of people through the application of information technology. Investigating citizens' awareness of these practices, *Kenny Doyle* discusses privacy and surveillance, and identifies the participants' positions.

### 3.3. Section 3 – Research and reflections on educational practices

*Ann Marcus-Quinn* and *Oliver McGarr*, in chapter 14, start the third section with a reflection on the use of technology and online resources in educational settings. They design and develop open educational resources for the teaching of poetry at post-primary and secondary levels to capture collaborative designs and development processes. Raising the problematics of the digital divide, they demonstrate that access to technology in Irish schools is not always an issue per se. Rather, the challenge for these schools is how to embrace technology and make use of the resources available. While the previous chapter focuses on the teachers' use of technology, *Marie-Thérèse Batardière*'s study investigates, from the students' point of view, the use of technology, and more specifically, the use of an online discussion forum during an intercultural exchange. Drawing on both qualitative and quantitative data, the author highlights the students' adopted patterns of behaviour when completing tasks, and explores the perceived benefits of an online discussion task with respect to language acquisition. Continuing the discussion on the use of technology, *Catherine Jeanneau* in chapter 16 questions whether the use of social media is changing teaching and learning practices in third-level education and if Irish students are ready to adopt these new tools. To address these questions, she explores online practices of staff and students in a language learning context. While her data reveals that students have no strong opposition to the use of technology and social media in their learning environment, she demonstrates that preconceptions, however, exist and continue to prevail. *Sylvie Thouësny*, on the other hand, shows that although internet-based tools may be useful in theory to help language learners complete their tasks, in practice, these tools' functionalities are not systematically adopted by learners. More precisely, she investigates, at university level, the students' use of an internet-based word processing tool while engaging in a written task, and observes how they intervened and interacted with their teacher after being provided with comments on their written performance. The concluding chapter in this section outlines practical aspects of using internet resources in a foreign language classroom. Following an action research methodology, *Etáin Watson* in

chapter 18 discusses and documents activities and conclusions reached from using the internet as a learning support in her language classes.

### 3.4.　　Section 4 – Research and reflection on Irish resources

The fourth and final section of this collection of papers focuses on Irish resources. *Sharon Webb*, *Aja Teehan*, and *John Keating*, in chapter 19, begin with a discussion on how digital tools may be used to create multiple representations of a doctoral dissertation, and discuss one approach to present interactive "born-digital" theses that move beyond static scholarly texts. *Niall O'Leary*, in the following chapter, provides an insight into the wide-ranging scope of the "Digital Humanities Observatory: Discovery" application, an online gateway to Irish digital collections and resources. He details the challenges encountered in building the infrastructure of the system and explains how the application can offer researchers new ways of visualising data from humanities content. *Sonia Howell*, in chapter 21, offers a practical and critical account of "The Bibliography of Irish Literary Criticism", a bibliographical database developed by humanities and information and communication technology researchers. More specifically, she investigates the content of the database as well as the searches it permits, and argues that paying attention to issues with respect to dissemination and sustainability is essential to ensure the ongoing viability of the digital database. *Vanessa Liston*, *Clodagh Harris*, *Mark O'Toole*, and *Margaret Liston*, in the final chapter of this section, show how political knowledge resources can be drawn from citizens' everyday communications. They present the SOWIT project, an e-supported deliberation process, which aims to not only improve political communications, deliberations, and active reflections between citizens and public representatives, but also provide them with new digital political artefacts and objective data.

## 4.　　Conclusion

The articles presented in this edited book illustrate the broad diversity of internet-based studies in an Irish context, as well as the interdisciplinarity

which distinguishes much of its outputs. From digital humanities in the strictest sense – through the creation and use of digital objects and resources to a close examination of digital texts, from ethical issues to societal issues – through the lenses of gender or nationality, from empirical research to practitioners reports, the chapters are a snapshot of internet research in Ireland. Our contributors come from many third-level institutions on the island – universities as well as institutes of technology, east and west, north and south –, thus illustrating a geographical space linked to digital spaces. It is our hope that this open access publication will enable students, researchers and practitioners to gain a broader understanding of these areas of research in Ireland, and will foster communication and cooperation among internet researchers.

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