Qualitative Researchers in the Blogosphere:
Using Blogs as Diaries and Data

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Weblogs or blogs can provide qualitative researchers with a medium for expressing their thoughts and opinions on qualitative research methods and products as well as serving as the source of data for qualitative studies. Present examples serve as exemplary guides to the potential value of this virtual communication application. Key Words: Blog, Blogging, and Qualitative Research

The Internet has long provided qualitative researchers with a means to communicate with colleagues from around the world, a source to access information and resources, and a rich environment within which to collect data and conduct research. Even if you were the only qualitative researcher in your university or company you could connect with like-minded colleagues through pioneering email lists like the University of Georgia's QUALRS-L (http://listserv.uga.edu/cgi-bin/wa?SUBED1=qualrs-l&A=1) and the Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQAS) Networking Project's Qual-software (http://caqdas.soc.surrey.ac.uk/qualsoftware.htm) to share ideas and seek guidance. Weblogs or blogs, a more recent addition to the array of web-based options, also appear to be offering many qualitative researchers some new and innovative ways to collaborate, communicate, and community-build.

A Quick Introduction to Blogs

Weblogs or blogs for short can be personal diaries shared by individuals giving us as readers a sometimes voyeuristic view into the lives and minds of these virtual authors. "At their core, weblogs are pages consisting of several posts or distinct chunks of information per page, usually arranged in reverse chronological order from the most recent post at the top of the page to the oldest post at the bottom" (Bausch, Haughey, & Hourihan, 2002, p. 7). In these posts the authors or bloggers share personal stories, links to online resources, and sometimes re-post the messages of other bloggers.

Postings on popular blogs receive many follow-up rejoinders by readers who share their opinions on the bloggers' opinions. Blog postings may also be tagged by readers and sent to social bookmarking sites like Digg (http://digg.com/) where new readers can find and rate the posting. Specialized blogging search engines such as Technorati (http://technorati.com/) can also help readers find interesting bloggers, blogs, and blog postings.

The ability for readers to find and promote weblogs makes the practice of blogging appealing for parties wanting to market their products and services. Many blogs are connected with businesses and provide opportunities for the bloggers to promote their professional brands and to increase awareness of their companies and missions. Their readers actually help the bloggers and their associated companies' marketing efforts by

sharing and distributing the blog messages within personal networks and connections on social networking sites as Facebook (http://www.facebook.com/) and LinkedIn (http://www.linkedin.com/). This practice of sharing and connecting of both people and information in a peer-to-peer collaborative spirit via the Internet is commonly called Web 2.0 (Tapscott & Williams, 2008).

On a personal level bloggers not connected to a particular company can also extend their idiosyncratic brand out into the "blogosphere" through their particular choices of content focus, word styling, emotional timber, and media enhancements. This regular sharing of personal insights and observations is not an easy undertaking and the commitment of solo bloggers to sustain their blogs for years is quite remarkable given what appears to be a high rate of "blog mortality" or "blog stagnation" with many sites.

Qualitative Research and Blogging

The popularity and the potential of blogging have made it attractive to qualitative researchers in a number of ways. For some it is a way to share their particular view on the qualitative family of methods and their applications. For others it has been a choice to help market and promote their qualitative research services and products. For still others blogging has been a way to help their students to share their progress in becoming competent qualitative researchers. Lastly, blogging has been both a subject of qualitative researchers' studies and a means for investigators to connect with research subjects and generate data for analysis. In the next few sections I will review some of the more interesting efforts qualitative researchers have attempted to utilize the blogosphere for promotion, education, and research.

Qualitative Research Blogs

Countless bloggers post individual entries on qualitative research and every reader can sift through these using blogging search engines such as Technorati; there are also many blogs that are devoted primarily to qualitative research and related methods. For example Christina Laun on the Online Universities.com website has identified the "Top 100 Anthropology Blogs" http://www.onlineuniversities.com/blog/2008/12/top-100-anthropology-blogs/. Here are a handful of sites I found useful, provocative, and exemplary of what qualitative researchers can accomplish via blogging themselves.

Conversations with Dina (http://dinamehta.com/). Dina Mehta seems to be one of the earliest qualitative research bloggers with her postings going back to at least 2003. She is founder or co-founder of some interesting qualitative research, marketing, and innovation companies in Mumbai, India, such as Explore Research and Consultancy http://radio.weblogs.com/0121664/stories/2005/10/15/companyProfile.html) which provides qualitative research services and Mosoci India (http://mosoci.com/) which helps companies embrace change. Dina is a Web 2.0 innovator so her blog entries always help to give me a glimpse into the near future of social media and how qualitative researchers may work in this emerging virtual world.

Zebra Bites (http://zebrabites.com/). Katie Harris is the director of qualitative research at Australia's Zebra Research (http://www.zebra-research.com.au/) and her blog entries focus on general qualitative topics and issues such as conducting qualitative research from technological and marketing perspectives. I especially like Katie's postings because they provide a personal perspective into the world of professional qualitative research consultants. I also think she's a good teacher too as exemplified by her series of qualitative research blogs appearing in Marketingmag.com.au (http://www.marketingmag.com.au/content/author/762/).

Qualitative Research Café (http://mathison.edublogs.org/). Sandra Mathison, a Professor of Education at the University of British Columbia, is the proprietor of the Café. Since 2007 she has regularly posted on topics ranging from "big abstract ideas" such as epistemology and philosophy to course syllabi and researcher roles as well as providing links to sites on data analysis, ethics, image based research, methods, and research publications. Besides the Café, Sandra also runs the "E-valuation" blog (http://weblogs.elearning.ubc.ca/mathison/).

Participation Action Research and Organizational Change
(http://participaction.wordpress.com/). Graham Dover, a doctoral student in the Management and Organization Studies area at SFU Business School in Vancouver, created this information rich and aesthetically appealing blog in June and July 2008 and although he notes that he does not maintain it that actively, the site is still worth a visit and an extensive exploration. Graham's home blog located at http://grahamdover.wordpress.com/home/ is also worth a trip to learn more about his research and ideas "around how to organize substantive social change drawing on formal research to random thoughts on social innovation, institutional change and work, social movements and nonprofit organizations."

The East St. Louis Action Research Project (http://www.eslarpinaction.blogspot.com/). ESLARP in Action is "a community assistance and development project guided by action research, service learning, and neighborhood partnerships." They effectively use their blog to distribute news on the great things their faculty and students from several campus units and a number of East St. Louis neighborhood groups do to "address the immediate and long-term needs of some of the city's most distressed communities." There main web site can be found at http://www.eslarp.uiuc.edu/.

Qualitative Research Fluency Blog
(http://shulman.ucsur.pitt.edu/doc/Syllabi/Qual_Syllabus08.pdf). For three years Stuart Shulman, then of the University of Pittsburgh and now of the University of Massachusetts, has asked his students in a doctoral qualitative research seminar to create blogs through which they share their experiences learning to become more fluent qualitative researchers. Here are links to sample pages from all three years of the project:

> 2006: http://stuqual.blogspot.com/
> 2007: http://docs2007.wordpress.com/
> 2008: http://chi-jung.blogspot.com/

From any of these sample blogs you can find links to the other members of the seminar who participated in that year's weblog exercise. Although there are many course-connected blogs I really liked these examples because of the depth of expression of Stuart's students and the quality of the postings they made. Reading through them collectively can give anyone teaching or learning qualitative research a wonderful insider's perspective on the joys and tribulations of becoming a qualitative researcher.

In searching for interesting qualitative research blogs I also found some sites whose bloggers seem to have abandoned or at least stopped actively posting new entries a few months ago:

> The Qualitative Research Blog (http://www.reshmaanand.com/): 2006-2007
> Qualitative Social Work (http://qualsw.blogspot.com/): 2007-2008
> Qualitative Research Blog (http://thinklounge.blogspot.com/): 2006-2008

Many of these weblogs were packed with fascinating postings while they were being regularly nurtured, so their apparent dormancy or passing was disappointing.

Qualitative Research on Blogging

The often personal nature of blogs can make them fruitful opportunities for qualitative researchers to study because they can afford investigators a public conduit to back stage thoughts and feelings of others. As a form of netography (Kozinets, 2002), qualitative research on blogging presents its own unique set of opportunities and challenges. Recent papers by Hookway (2008), Wakeford and Cohen (2008), and Ward (2006) are good places to learn how to initiate and maintain this approach to data collection and generation.

For further assistance in seeing how blogs can be used in qualitative inquiries Clarke and van Amerom's 2008 study in which they compared the blogs created by depressed men and women, Harper and Harper's 2006 research on students' self-disclosure typology, and Tekinarslan's 2008 investigation of instructor and undergraduate students' experiences are solid examples to explore. Another way to sample this medium as a research is to explore Stuart Shulman's student fluency blogs mentioned earlier in this review as a data set with this basic "grand tour question:" What resources do student learning qualitative research find useful?" In doing so you can quickly understand how his students found a blending of text and online resources a valuable way of becoming more fluent in qualitative research.

The Future of Qualitative Research and Blogs

It's hard to gauge whether or not blogging will continue to be a popular medium for qualitative researchers or will it be passed over like gopherspace, a precursor to the World Wide Web, as new or better choices to communicate become available to "netizens" seeking an outlet to express themselves. According to Tapscott and Williams (2008) today we have "over 50 million blogs, 1.5 million blog postings daily, and a new blog created every second" (p. 40). With such a volume of data I can imagine qualitative

researchers could continue to find weblogs a limitless source of research for the foreseeable future.

I also think the blogging philosophy of sharing personal insights and experiences lends itself well to what qualitative researchers do in the conduct of their work. As the trend for qualitative researchers to be more transparent continues to be a best practice, blogs should remain a fitting place for qualitative investigators to share their perspectives, biases, and reflective findings for some time to come.

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