Reflecting on the experience of interviewing online: perspectives from the Internet and HIV study in London

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Abstract This paper considers some of the strengths and weaknesses of conducting synchronous online interviews for qualitative research. It is based on a study among gay/bisexual men that used both qualitative and quantitative methods to explore the association between seeking sex through the Internet and HIV transmission risk. Between June 2002 and January 2004, 128 gay/bisexual men living in London were interviewed one-to-one by the first author (MD) about their experience of using the Internet to find sexual partners and negotiating condom use for anal sex. Thirty-five men were interviewed online, while 93 were interviewed face-to-face (i.e. offline). This paper draws on MD’s experience of conducting these interviews—both online and face-to-face. Synchronous online interviews have the advantage of being cheap, convenient and attractive to people who do not like face-to-face interviews. However, some of the social conventions and technical limitations of computer-mediated-communication can introduce ambiguity into the online dialogue. To minimize this ambiguity, both interviewer and interviewee have to edit their online interaction. One of the distinctive features of the online interview is that it emerges as a form of textual performance. This raises fundamental questions about the suitability of the synchronous online interview for exploring sensitive topics such as risky sexual behaviour.

Introduction

The Internet is emerging as a valuable tool for collecting information about HIV risk behaviours, particularly from geographically isolated or socially distant groups (Elford et al., 2004a; McClelland, 2002; Ross et al., 2000; Tikkanen & Ross, 2003). The browsing and interactive features of the Internet are particularly well suited to recruiting participants for surveys, focus groups and face-to-face (FTF) interviews. While HIV researchers have considered some of the methodological aspects of collecting quantitative data via the Internet, there has been relatively little discussion about how the Internet can generate qualitative data.
In other fields, Internet-based qualitative research has generally taken the form of ethnography, using participatory methods, textual analysis plus online consultations and interviews (Slater, 2002; Turkle, 1995; Ward, 1999). This paper reflects on the experience of using the Internet to conduct one-to-one interviews online for research about HIV risk. It draws on qualitative research carried out as part of the Internet and HIV study in London, an investigation of gay men’s use of the Internet for sexual partnering and its implications for HIV risk behaviour (Elford, 2003; Elford et al., 2004a,b. (Also see http://www.hda-online.org.uk/html/nhpis/cher/archives/cher14.pdf.) We hope that this paper will (1) generate a debate on the use of the Internet for conducting qualitative research into sexual experience and (2) provide some learning points for researchers and practitioners who use the Internet in their own work.

Internet and HIV study

The use of the Internet for seeking sexual partners and its implications for HIV/STD risk behaviours have been explored using both quantitative and qualitative research methods in four samples of London gay/bisexual men (referred to here as ‘gay men’). The four samples, recruited both online and offline, were: (1) gay men using Internet chat-rooms and profiles; (2) HIV-positive gay men attending a public outpatient treatments clinic; (3) gay men seeking an HIV test in a public HIV testing or sexual health clinic; and (4) gay men recruited in a community setting. Quantitative data were collected by means of confidential, anonymous self-administered questionnaires (completed on-line by the Internet sample), which sought information on use of the Internet and sexual risk behaviour. Men who completed the questionnaire were then asked if they would be willing to take part in the qualitative arm of the study. Qualitative data were collected by means of one-to-one interviews, conducted either face-to-face (FTF) or online, which explored the emergence of social and sexual networks via the Internet. The methods have been described in detail elsewhere (Elford et al., 2004b). Further information about the study can be found at http://www.city.ac.uk/barts/hsi. This paper focuses on the qualitative arm of the study.

Methods

Sample

Between June 2002 and January 2004, 128 volunteers were interviewed about their experience of using the Internet to find sexual partners and their risk behaviour with men they met online as well as FTF. The men volunteered on an altruistic basis by opting into the qualitative study after completing the self-administered questionnaire. No financial incentive was offered. Sixty-five men were recruited through the Internet, of whom 35 were interviewed online while 30 were interviewed FTF. A further 63 men, all interviewed FTF, were recruited in the HIV testing, HIV treatment and sexual health clinics or in community settings (Table 1). All volunteers invited for a qualitative interview, either FTF or online, completed it. The sample had the following characteristics: age: range 21–66 years, mean 38 years; education: 72 (69%) had a post-secondary qualification; employment: 78 (75%) were employed at the time of the interview; HIV status: 32 (31%) HIV-positive; 59 (57%) HIV-negative; 13 (12%) untested; Internet use: 89 (70%) were currently using the Internet to find sexual partners.
Interviewing face-to-face

FTF interviews \((n=93)\) were conducted in accordance with the established practice of the intersubjective or active interview (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002). A topic guide was used as a starting point, but the interviews were conversational in style allowing the interviewer to follow up emerging themes. The interviews were audiotaped, transcribed and entered into qualitative analysis software (Nvivo). Both written and verbal informed consent were obtained prior to the interview. Verbal consent was also obtained at the end of each interview. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes.

Interviewing online

Online interviews \((n=35)\) were conducted in private chat-rooms in Gay.com using Internet Relay Chat (IRC) style software. The text generated was copied and pasted into a Word document and transferred into qualitative data analysis software (Nvivo). The online interviews used the same topic guide as the FTF interviews. Informed consent for online interviews was obtained by e-mail prior to the interview as recommended by Eysenbach and Till (2001). As suggested by Murray and Sixsmith (1998) in their discussion of the ethics of generating qualitative data via Internet technology, textual informed consent was obtained just prior to and after the interview. The online interviews were synchronous and ‘one-off’ (i.e. single events) and therefore resembled the FTF interviews. The online interviews lasted between 60 and 180 minutes. With respect to their synchronous and singular qualities, the online interviews conducted for the Internet and HIV study were somewhat unusual for social research via the Internet. Other researchers have used alternative forms of data generation including protracted and iterative asynchronous e-mail interviews (McClelland, 2002; Slater, 1998; Turkle, 1995; Ward, 1999).

Interviews

Interviews were conducted in two phases (for a detailed description of the methods, see Elford et al., submitted). Phase one interviews placed emphasis on how men used the Internet for dating, how they presented themselves in chat-rooms and dating profiles, the various techniques used for online communication, the pros and cons of using the Internet to communicate and their sexual interests. Phase 2, which was the main part of the study, focused on sexual episodes with men the respondents had met via the Internet and in other settings. Particular attention was paid to whether or not condoms were used for anal sex, disclosure of HIV serostatus and other aspects of HIV transmission risk. Twenty-four men were interviewed for phase 1 (14 online, 10 FTF) while a further 104 men were interviewed for phase 2 (21 online, 83 FTF).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recruitment site</th>
<th>Online interview</th>
<th>Face-to-face interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community HIV testing clinic HIV treatment clinic</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>23 20 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Number of online and face-to-face interviews by recruitment site
**Analysis**

This paper describes the experience of conducting the online interviews and reflects on some of the strengths and weaknesses of using the Internet to generate knowledge about social experience.

**Results**

**Adaptation**

Online interviewing has some advantages for qualitative research, as others have also found (Mann & Stewart, 2002). For example, online interviews reduce the need for travel and the costs of transcription. There are time-savings for a researcher involved in more than one study or conducting multi-method studies, as is often the case in public health. Online interviews can also put the researcher in touch with geographically or socially isolated people and overcome some concerns about anonymity and disclosure.

However, online interviewing raises practical concerns, which require an adaptation of interviewing technique. Principal among these are the technical and experiential qualities of computer-mediated-communication (CMC). Online interviews in the synchronous mode are slow. In our study, they took about twice the length of FTF interviews and produced far fewer words. For example, a 120-minute online interview produced about seven pages of text. A 90-minute FTF interview produced 30 to 40 pages of text. The exchange of questions and responses was clearly influenced by the reading, reflection and typing skills of the respondents. In some exchanges, quite some time elapsed before a response appeared, sometimes as a result of computer crashes. The lack of non-verbal reinforcement such as eye contact compounds the apparent slowness of the online interview dialogue (Mann & Stewart, 2002).

Because of these features, the interviewer has to adopt some of the conventions of Internet Relay Chat for the online interview. For example, in this study MD resorted to short, closed questions, fostered simple Q&A sequences and tried to keep the dialogue ‘light’. The following extract from an online interview exemplifies these features:

```
61: <MD> have u had an HIV test
62: <Interviewee> i am poz
63: <MD> how long have you known
64: <Interviewee> 09/03/2000
65: <MD> are you on treatments
66: <Interviewee> not yet but nearly 3 months ago
67: <Interviewee> go to xy clinic
68: <MD> sorry—have you been on treatments for 3 months
69: <Interviewee> no the professor felt that the time wasn’t right and that my consultant was being too cautious
70: <MD> OK—what status is yr bf
71: <Interviewee> counts have bounced back up on last count last month
72: <Interviewee> +
73: <MD> how did u meet
74: <Interviewee> you haven’t looked at my profile have you.......lol
75: <Interviewee> through cupids
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76: <MD> nope—should i do it now
77: <Interviewee> doesn’t matter
78: <MD> i am worried that i will lose the connection
79: <Interviewee> you can if you want
80: <MD> wot is cupids
81: <Interviewee> matching ‘service’
82: <Interviewee> i put in what i wanted
83: <MD> wot did u put in?
84: <Interviewee> and when a new user logs on that matches they tell me
85: <MD> kewl
86: <Interviewee> can’t remember but it worked
87: <MD> did u say u wanted a positive guy
88: <Interviewee> no
89: <Interviewee> but it clearly says on my profile that i am so it cuts out the wankers
90: <MD> what do u mean wankers
91: <Interviewee> soz for language
92: <MD> wot is soz
93: <Interviewee> the ones that chat for hours then when they find out you are poz they ‘go away’ never to be seen again
94: <Interviewee> soz = sorry
95: <MD> did that happen 2 u
96: <Interviewee> what nationality are you mark?
97: <Interviewee> many a time
98: <MD> i am British
99: <Interviewee> it’s as if you can’t hold a conversation without wanting to jump in the sack with them
100: <Interviewee> cool
101: <MD> why do u think they went away
102: <Interviewee> fer, lack of knowledge
103: <MD>??
104: <Interviewee> i use to think it was because they didn’t need to take the gamble
105: <MD> can u expand
106: <Interviewee> but that’s bollocks they are just uneducated
107: <MD> do u mean they overestimate the risks
108: <Interviewee> they didn’t want to take the gamble with regard to shagging a +ve guy for fear of contracting HIV
109: <Interviewee> oh big time over estimate the risks

[later]

167: <MD> how many sex partners do u think u have had off the net
168: <Interviewee> about a 100 or so
169: <MD> when did u start using the net
170: <Interviewee> 4–5 years ago
171: <MD> have u met yr bfs on the net
172: <Interviewee> have been to a few orgies as well that were organised from here
173: <Interviewee> yep met a few bfs on here
174: <MD> all yr bfs?
175: <Interviewee> met some of my temps on here as well 😊
176: <MD> wot is temp;-)
177: <Interviewee> no not all my bfs
178: <MD> ok what made u go onto the internet
179: <Interviewee> bf’s have come from various areas of life
180: <Interviewee> onto the net for sex you mean or just onto the net in general
181: <MD> what came first general or sex
182: <Interviewee> what came first the chicken or the egg
183: <Interviewee> lol
184: <MD> rofl
185: <MD> what made u go the net
186: <Interviewee> sorry to be str8 about this but they both came at the same time

This extract highlights the distinctive qualities of the online interview interaction. For example, the participants use acronyms to denote non-verbal expressions (LOL, laugh out loud; ROFL, rolling on the floor laughing) and emotions to express smiles (;-); but at other times expedient textual abbreviations are used (str8 = straight; soz = sorry). Expressions are punctuated in prose style (!; ?); but at other times expedient textual abbreviations are used (str8 = straight; soz = sorry). The ‘dialogue’ can also be said to be staccato or even pointed. There is also some ambiguity in turn-taking. For example between lines 65 to 71 and 173 to 180, the ‘dialogue’ loses some of its single linear form and separates into more than one thread. In these situations, ‘discussion’ of treatment tumbles into ‘discussion’ of relationships or a ‘discussion’ of boyfriends tumbles into a ‘discussion’ about the social value of the Internet. There is also some ambiguity. Between lines 89 to 109 there is a sense of editing out of detail that may have implications for the depiction of lived experience, in this case the management of HIV serostatus identity online, stigma and HIV risk. Online interviews appear, therefore, to have distinctive features, notably the textual quality of the dialogue and its ambiguity.

Textual performance

The online interviews emerged as a form of textual performance. There is a longstanding tradition in interpretive sociology of dramaturgy or the qualitative interview as social performance (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997; Denzin, 2002; Goffman, 1959), something that has not escaped online researchers (Miller, 1995; Sannicolas, 1997). In this perspective, a FTF interview can be viewed as a verbal interaction set into a cultural context of certain assumptions about the interview and the roles of the interviewee, interviewer and the putative audience. In brief, people enter into an interview with some awareness of their role as a social actor with privileged access to personal experiences that they can make available to others. From this point of view FTF interview data can be regarded as an interpersonal and, for our purposes, verbal performance.

The typed dialogue of online interviews can therefore be seen as textual performance. As such, there is cause to argue that online interviewing is a distinctive social practice and should
not be simply equated with FTF interviews. For example, data derived from online interviews are not properly represented as speech. Online interview data is textual performance mediated by the social and technical aspects of the Internet. Because of these features and the qualities of CMC in synchronous online interviews, such text can be ambiguous.

**Ambiguity**

Online dialogue can get out of order. Because of the time that elapsed between questions and answers and because interview participants scan back up the page to review the dialogue, chat text does not always adhere to the conversational logic of turn-taking and linearity. In some situations, this can mean that the order of the text is not the order of the dialogue. This tendency creates distinctive ontological properties for the online interview ‘dialogue’, where responses become multilinear, ambiguous or even nonsensical. This is most important when one response can be taken to be an adequate response to more than one question, a feature of chat that contributes to its dual quality of fun and frustration. Another source of ambiguity arises in some forms of wordplay. For example, sarcasm and metaphor may not work well online. A sarcastic statement can be taken as offensive or simply not noticed. Wordplay such as metaphor or jokes can lead to unwanted need for clarification. In FTF interviewing, ambiguity and metaphor can often be a source of thematic development. But the online environment does not lend itself to such exploration. For example, one technique of FTF interviews involves probing and clarifying about meanings to help the interviewer understand what has been said or to explore the features and qualities of an interview theme. But online, ambiguity or any other form of straying from the conventions of online chat can disrupt the interview. Clarification disrupts the flow of an already ambiguous dialogue and takes time in an already protracted engagement. Online interaction is not easily ‘repaired’ if ambiguity or other distractions arise.

These various forms of ambiguity mean that the interviewee and interviewer concentrate on forms of dialogue that preclude loss of meaning and the disruption of coherent interaction. In this regard closed questions and Q&A sequences oriented to ‘facts’ tend to take precedence, in particular with interviewees not so familiar with Internet chat. CMC and Internet culture in general is often depicted as subversive. Ironically, the subversive qualities of Internet culture do not seem to be borne out in the practice of online research. On the contrary, to sustain online interaction, one is required to engage with the social and technical regulation of CMC. Wordplay that strays too far beyond certain accepted conventions of meaning can undo online communication.

**Sexual practice**

If online interviews are textual performance bound by the social and technical constraints of CMC and subject to ambiguity, they may not be useful for some research purposes. In our study, we were interested in the association between Internet dating and HIV risk. Since this is a new area of research we focused on descriptive and theory-building modes of qualitative research inquiry. However, synchronous one-off online interviews may not be the best choice for trying to describe social practices, particularly sexual behaviour. Our ongoing analysis of the qualitative data suggests that without the FTF interviews, our knowledge of the sexual practices of Internet users would be somewhat limited. In fact, the closed and information-oriented questions in the online interviews were only possible because the FTF interviews provided so much detail and theoretical elaboration.
Discussion

Like any data generation technique, synchronous online interviews have strengths and weaknesses. They are cheap, convenient and may be more acceptable to people who are unable, or do not want to attend a FTF interview. However, synchronous online interviews are slow and follow-up probing can inhibit the flow of the ‘dialogue’. They are also subject to frequent breakdown in turn-taking because some of the social and conversational cues of a FTF interview are not present. For these reasons, the text generated by a synchronous online interview text can be ambiguous.

Consequently, online synchronous interviews do not readily lend themselves to the exploration of meaning, raising questions about how they can contribute to an in-depth description of social or sexual experience. However, combined with other forms of data generation, such as FTF interviews as in our study, synchronous online interviews may be a useful adjunct. Online interviews may have a place in the research of Internet communication per se, online networks and communities (McClelland, 2002; Rival et al., 1998; Ward, 1999), when assembling and screening a qualitative sample or for building a sample of people reluctant to do FTF interviews. However, in terms of building theory about sexual behaviour and HIV risk or the social relevance of CMC for gay men, synchronous online interviews appear to present a number of limitations. Some of these may be overcome by conducting asynchronous online interviews (e.g. using e-mail) where there is more time for reflection and elaboration.

Online and FTF interviews should be viewed as distinct research forms with distinct, but different attributes. We need to acknowledge, however, the dynamic nature of the social and technical qualities of the Internet. Every improvement in the use of the Internet has been for faster, more open communication including sound, vision and, perhaps in the future, accompanying text. We are working now within the current limits of technology. However, we would not be entering the realm of science fiction were we to consider the possibility of replacing FTF with Internet interviews in the future.

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References


