Using asynchronous written online communications for qualitative inquiries: a research note

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Abstract
Qualitative online inquiries are being used more and more but their use has been little methodologically refined so far. This is already true for a systematic differentiation between asynchronous/synchronous and oral/written varieties of communication and their specific benefits when we use them as qualitative research instruments. In this note, we focus on the methodological benefits of asynchronous online communication between absent communication partners with a time lag. Before doing so, we discriminate between synchrony and asynchrony in (human) social interaction and arrange them on a continuum of decreasing action cues and conceptual speech elements.

Keywords
asynchronous methods, e-mail interviews, online research, qualitative online methods, written inquiry

Introduction and disambiguation
The internet is increasingly seen by qualitative researchers as an empirical data resource. This is especially true for conversation analyses and (multi-sited) ethnography. In addition, online communications have increasingly been used for reactive forms of qualitative data collection since the mid-1990s, such as in the form of group discussions or dialogues via e-mail, web forums, chats and (micro-) blogs. Individuals pursue certain
objectives by using online communication and therefore it is possible to obtain specific data or even develop new methods for qualitative research. Hence, there is a growing body of literature dealing with methodological issues of internet-mediated communication and research (Dicks, 2012; Hanna, 2001; Hine, 2000; Hull and Nelson, 2005; Jones and Woolley, 2015; Lijadi and van Schalkwyk, 2015; Mann and Stewart, 2000; Murray, 1997; Rezabek, 2000; Salmons, 2015; Wilson and Swift, 2015).

In accordance with this, purposely-written communication with a time lag and the physical absence of the communication partners seems to be promising for (reactive) qualitative research. We suggest that even written online communications are seldom purely text-only but are hybrid data ‘that [blend] elements of oral and written language with features that are more common online than in any other language medium’ (Baym, 2010: 63). Furthermore, the boundary between synchronous and asynchronous communication is not clear, because individuals may switch between these different forms of interaction or use any internet medium for both synchronous and asynchronous interactions. We also consider long-term time-lagged communication is not necessarily only a characteristic of internet-mediated interactions but also a phenomenon in non-virtual interactions. This is also true for variants of multimodality, which means the mix of visual, graphic and textual language elements within contributions in written communications as well as in spoken ones, and in virtual conversations as well as in immediate face-to-face interactions. In almost the same manner, differences in speaker-audience relationships, which mean opportunities for public and private communications from one to many known or unknown counterparts, have not only existed since Web 2.0 or only in written communication. Thus, not only is the border between synchronous and asynchronous communication fuzzy but also the boundary between mediated and immediate face-to-face interactions.

Considering this heterogeneity within the range of online and ‘offline’ conversations, we address the difference between clear time-bounded appointments for instant messaging, which require the ‘screen’ presence of the communication partners at the same time on the one hand, and interactions lasting for weeks or months with a specific duration and frequency of messaging and allowing the absence of the particular listener(s) or reader(s) on the other hand. For example, if participants who are invited or appointed for a chat conversation do not answer within a reasonable time, a message loses its topicality and the conversation peters out because it was started but not quickly continued. Usually, participants who are not (or do not show themselves) online in instant-message programs will not be addressed with instant messages. In contrast, postings in web forums and e-mails do not require instant reactions and the immediate screen-presence of the communication partners. With the focus on this contrast between instant messaging and conversations with a time lag, asynchronous online communications constitute a huge contrast with face-to-face inquiries in qualitative research, which constitute time-bound appointments with all communication partners physically present at the same time and where ‘instant messaging’ and direct synchronization of particular actions can be expected. This is why internet-mediated chats are primarily used as an efficient alternative to face-to-face interviews or focus groups in market and social research (Mann and Stewart, 2000). Thus, we prefer not to completely blur the differences but instead argue for a continuum.
Because computer-mediated instant messaging and even video chats are also mediated communication which is much influenced by technological conditions (Heath and Luff, 1993; Schlegloff, 2002), and considering the difficulty of a strong differentiation between online/offline, oral/literal, and synchronous/asynchronous modes of communication, we think it is meaningful to arrange the different forms on a scale which consists of different degrees of a) information richness for synchronization of actions and, thereby, b) dissimilar grades of conceptual speech and writing (see Figure 1). This continuum can integrate the essential elements of existing knowledge about immediate and mediated interaction: First, interaction studies demonstrate that bodily (nonverbal and vocal) cues are early stages of social action and immediate face-to-face interaction is the prototype of social adaptation, while they locate long-lasting asynchronous get-togethers of many people ‘at the outer border of what we call social opportunities’ (Goffman, 1986: 7; Argyle and Dean, 1965; Mead, 1968, 1987). Second, linguistic findings show an increase in the conscious use of writing elements the more messaging is conceptualized as asynchronous by the communication partners, while conceptually oral elements are found more often in instant messaging, which is seen as synchronous ‘talk’ (Dürscheid, 2003; Storrer, 2001).

Therefore, it is important to emphasize that we do not understand writing as per se formal and impersonal but again on a continuum from formal to casual writing, depending on the context of the situation (Halliday, 1973; Hymes, 1972). Although written casual conversations and interactions with personal and intimate involvement are mainly described as having the characteristics of oral language (for a review, see Murray, 1988), we assume a range of text types which includes both strictly impersonal and task-oriented ones as well as strongly intimate, emotional and personal texts although they are conceptually written, for example a ministerial memorandum versus a personal love letter. Hence, personal involvement is ‘primarily the result of the specific context of situation, not of whether it is written or oral’ (Murray, 1988: 370). Thus, written messaging seems to have more oral elements in (quasi) synchronous online communications, but this does not automatically imply a lack of informality, intimacy and the personal in writing. In general, computer-mediated typed conversations are not necessarily less intimate and emotional as Social Presence Theory (Short et al., 1976) and Media Richness Theory.

Figure 1. Continuum of synchronous and asynchronous interaction.
Qualitative Research (Daft and Lengel, 1984) imply. Technologies have less impact on the degree of emotional and personal involvement than goals, deliberations and choices made by the interactors within the context. Now there is a growing body of empirical findings about (even hyper-) personal, emotional and intimate computer-mediated interactions (Baym, 2010; Finkel et al., 2012; Walther, 1992, 1996) and even in mass communication individuals try to achieve “intimacy at a distance” (Horton and Wohl, 1956).

There are even authors and empirical studies suggesting that typed asynchronous interactions can enable individuals to be more intimate, emotional and personal in specific contexts.² If this is true, non-instant asynchronous messaging offers a huge potential for using or rather developing new methods, not only cheap alternatives to conventional ones. We discuss this point below.

The benefits of written asynchronous online inquiries: studying individual experiencing

According to existing knowledge about conceptual asynchronous written communications, one can assume that they promise specific benefits for qualitative research. One of the most central advantages of written communication is ‘self-perpetuation,’ with the goal of going beyond the immediate situation and providing permanence (Ehlich, 1980). Written language is the solution for the paradox of self-monitoring and the limits of the psychic ‘working storage’ (Esposito, 1993: 347). It was already argued by Simmel (1983) that in written correspondence deeply personal and immediate experiences (such as emotions) can be connected to the objective and permanent form of written language. Thus, a process of objectification of the ‘psyche’ takes place, and mainly through its multimodality written communication allows a manifest interconnection between the affective and the intellectual (Hull and Nelson, 2005).

For qualitative research, the ‘mail survey’ is so far a somewhat marginal procedure (Schiek, 2014), while the face-to-face interview is said to be the most productive mode of data production.³ Nevertheless, it is particularly interesting for qualitative researchers when their interest is directed to processes of the constitution of meaning and experience, and it opens up opportunities to study these processes at an earlier stage than is possible with synchronous and oral procedures – namely when an experience is not (yet) consolidated or ratified socially and when it is still in the process of being sorted, refined, discarded, reformulated or discussed with third parties, and tried out in interaction. Therefore, empirical findings show that individuals use asynchronous communications in particular for personal messages regarding ‘unusual’ experiences and the search for their meaning (Boneito-Montagut, 2015; Schiek, 2014; Zhao and Elesh, 2008). Thus, qualitative research can come close to the limits of sociality and examine processes that lie between objectivity and immediate subjectivity, ‘internal dialogue’ and objective importance (Mead, 1973) or ‘between self-talk and public discourse’ (Augustin, 2015).

This is made possible by the fact that experiences related in written communications do not need to be placed in schemes and systems that are important for the functioning of verbal face-to-face communications. Unlike the listener, the reader is able to handle a fragmentary, parallel, non-sequential or backwards representation of content. Due to the
fact that it perpetuates transitory phenomena, written communication is even more precise, because the cost of repairing and clarifying faults and misunderstandings is higher and tolerated less than in immediate face-to-face communication (Clark and Brennan, 1991; Honeycutt, 2001). While in oral language ‘the meaning is in the context’, in written language ‘the meaning is in the text’ (Olson, 1977). Moreover, in written communication the writer and the reader have far more space and resources (for example, consulting external knowledge) and time for statements and their decoding. Thus, written communication allows for homologous experience representation, even if it does not fulfil the criteria for synchronous communication and certain text genres. The experience may not be available narratively, or not even verbally. As Hull and Nelson (2004: 253) point out, through hypertext the process of meanings and their constitution by the mutual interplay of feelings, perceptions and interpretations can be partly organized and expressed processually. It can also be seen empirically that respondents use these possibilities of text-type pluralism and multimodality for the presentation or categorisation of experiences on a large scale, and thus the limits of oral face-to-face interviews for certain issues can be overcome, particularly for research questions at the limits of sociality, such as studies about the treatment and constitution of unusual, immoral and intimate experiences (Hirschauer and Hofmann, 2012: 1; Schiek, 2014). This again is mainly made possible by the asynchrony and the absence of the communication partners involved, which is usually inherent in written language. The social (also physical) risk has its peak in immediate face-to-face interaction.

As soon as someone starts to speak, he makes it possible the receiver meant to insult him by this he is not listening or judging him to be nosy, crazy or offensive with what he has said. (Goffman, 1986: 44–45)

On the contrary, because spontaneous reactions, direct interruptions and evaluations are not expected in time-lagged interactions, experiences can unfold even if they are ‘messy’ or socially ‘unusual’ and cannot be verbalized (in their entirety) spontaneously. Therefore, it can be assumed that it is primarily the asynchrony, the absence of the communication partners, and the potential for multimodality which could provide profitable data for qualitative research.

The original conception of ‘hypertext’ (in microfilm and computer technology) targeted exactly this function of personal ‘mind mapping’: the storage of ideas and knowledge in all possible formats with links between them were a desirable system of structuring experience or knowledge for Bush (1945) and Nelson (1991), before or without them being placed in pure texts. Especially on the internet, ‘HTML’ (hypertext markup language) enables this to a far greater extent and far more comfortably than analogue systems and synchronous face-to-face communication methods – computers and internet ‘structure the self-monitoring much more sophisticated’ (Esposito, 1993: 348). Although multimodality was always an element of (asynchronous) correspondence and of human interaction (Finnegan, 2002: 243; Goodwin, 2003: 5), it is now inspired by the development of digital communication and it is used much more frequently in everyday life and more use is being made of it in the social sciences. This pays off particularly
because asynchronous research dialogue seems to stimulate the sorting of unusual, intimate and immoral experiences.

I’m pretty sure that I would never trust you so much if we were sitting opposite. If you had spoken to me in any way in the street or asked me if I would be willing to take part in a study about second wives … I would have certainly refused. That would have been too close for me. But so close is possible for me because there is distance. So, I think that’s interesting! And how personal I have become! (Früh, 2000: 65, message to the researcher, own translation).

**Conclusion**

Contrary to the – still predominant – image of written interaction as only useful in impersonal and task-oriented contexts, current and even early research indicates a huge potential for internet-mediated written conversations as instruments for qualitative research into individuals’ very personal and precarious experiences. Due to their literary nature, multimodality and the absence of communication partners, qualitative researchers have the chance to study the constitution of experience earlier than with oral communication – namely when experiences are not (yet) within the limits of sociality: when they have not (yet) been socially validated or legitimized.

Precisely because of the fuzzy border between synchronous and asynchronous, oral and written, and because of the variability of the audience (public/closed, one/many, known/unknown), researchers can engage with an impressive range or mixtures of different modes and forms of interaction. However, although we have argued strongly for asynchrony, we know little about how long-lasting written interviews or group discussions function. Maybe we need to combine them with (a ‘translation’ of) elements from immediate ‘instant’ face-to-face messaging, to switch between (group) public and closed conversation and – as academic writers use informal behaviour in mainly physical fields – to practise writing involving intimacy and social obligation (motivation) in research interactions.

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**Notes**

1. For pragmatic reasons, we focus on human interaction in this article and neglect non-human counterparts, as (not only) Latour (alias Johnson, 1988) suggests.
2. This is certainly one of the reasons for the increasing use of online communication for the psychological treatment of trauma and crisis (Bergmann, 2005; Gregory, 2015).
3. Even the use of the asynchronous Delphi method as a qualitative method is still a new procedure (Brady, 2015).

**References**


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