

REMOTE QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS. A CONTRIBUTION TOWARDS THE ANALYSIS OF REMEDIATION

MIKOŁAJ ŁĄTKOWSKI

University of Warsaw, Institute of Polish Culture
Krakowskie Przedmieście 26/28, 00-927 Warszawa
E-mail address: mikolaj.latkowski@gmail.com
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9539-5361>

ABSTRACT

Aim. The aim of this article is to contribute towards a wider analysis of remote qualitative interviews taking into consideration the context of qualitative research as a social practice, which is often overlooked in the body of literature.

Methods. The study is based on twelve in-depth interviews with qualitative researchers conducted by the author. The data is analysed with the focus on social aspects of qualitative interviews which engage the interviewee and the interviewer alike.

Results and conclusion. The analysis shows that, from the perspective of the researcher, the social aspects of qualitative interviews constitute an important part of the research method. The interview is a meeting that combines methodological features with the attitude of involved people. Researchers are accustomed to in-person interviews and from that perspective, they evaluate possible losses caused by remote research. However, as they self-reflect, this is not always an inherent feature of the new media but rather a question of how they are used and by whom. The interview is a meeting that utilises communication habits and experiences from both sides of the conversation – the interviewer and the interviewee. It is important to take this fact into consideration while analysing the potential of remote interviews, especially when social isolation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is changing our communication habits.

Cognitive value. The remote qualitative interviews are often described from the perspective of usability and effectiveness. This article describes researchers as a part of the research process who have their own attitudes and experiences in conducting research. From the perspective of social practices, these are almost as important as the knowledge and attitude of interviewees and they also affect the results of the research process.

Key words: qualitative interviews, remediation, interviews, remote research, qualitative research



INTRODUCTION

In recent years, qualitative research conducted remotely – without a face-to-face contact, mediated through technology – has become increasingly popular in many places across Poland and through various methods. However, these practices were always in the shadow of ‘traditional’ anthropological and ethnographic practices – ‘real’ interviews conducted in-person, especially in the field of academic research. Remote interviews were categorised as the second (or even subsequent) option when choosing a research method. They were meant to be used only in exceptional situations when researchers had no funds or time to execute a ‘proper’ research process.

This situation is rapidly changing due to the global pandemic that has an impact on whole societies. The process of social distancing is changing the ways in which social research is practised. The popularity of remote communication is increasing as today it is regarded as one of the safest means of communication. Telephone- and online-based communication has become the principal method of contact for many professions, between groups of friends, and even within families. As stated in texts written to help conduct fieldwork during the pandemic, isolation measures mean that social researchers need to find ways to perform their work differently, by applying “ideas for avoiding inter-personal interactions by using mediated forms that will achieve similar ends” (Lupton, 2020, p. 1).

One of the basic ways to achieve this goal is to conduct interviews remotely, using technology-mediated communication, e.g. telephones and online software which enable interlocutors to connect with each other through writing, video, and audio apps such as Skype, Zoom, Messenger, and others. However, the growing literature on remote interviews shows that this change is neither easy nor simple. In a textbook on qualitative interviewing, Herbert Rubin and Irene Rubin state that conducting research remotely is “not a preferred way” (Rubin & Rubin, 2011, p. 125). This point of view seems to be a consensus among qualitative researchers. The literature on remote modes of interviewing often aims to analyse new ways of conducting interviews in comparison to the traditional, in-person conversation.

These articles concentrate on the interview as a research method that aims to collect in-depth data. Authors explored an array of topics in regard to the quality of collected information: what changes, what we can lose or – in some cases – what can we gain using various technologies to conduct interviews (Hinchcliffe & Gavin, 2009; Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). There are many aspects of the new interview situation explored in the literature: limitations of communication which can be asynchronous (Bampton, Cowton, & Downs, 2013), devoid of non-verbal cues (Holt, 2010), challenges in building the rapport between the interviewer and the interviewee (Irving, 2011), as well as necessary re-thinking of ethical code or technological problems that do not occur during in-person interviews (Glassmeyer & Dibbs, 2012).

However, the major topic explored in almost every article on the subject is the quality of collected data – which is often compared with information gathered in traditional, in-person interviews (Johnson, Scheitle, & Ecklund, 2019; Abrams, Wang, Song, & Galindo-Gonzalez, 2015). The body of literature includes articles that examine this issue in the context of various technologies used in remote qualitative research. Among them there are the telephone (Holt, 2010; Irving, 2011), e-mail (Bampton, Cowton, & Downs, 2013; Burns, 2010), chat or instant messenger (Hinchcliffe & Gavin, 2009; Sade-Beck, 2004), as well as video Internet technologies (Seitz, 2016; Hanna, 2012; Glassmeyer & Dibbs, 2012). However, David Johnson, Christopher Scheitle, and Elaine Ecklund have recognised that despite the growing literature in this field, “research on mode effects in qualitative research (...) is less developed and there is little consensus about operationalizing ‘quality,’ making it difficult to assess whether one interview mode is indeed superior to the other” (Johnson, Scheitle, & Ecklund, 2019, p. 2).

Despite the growing popularity of remote interviews, there is not a lot of research that focuses on the topic of conducting and participating in mediated interviews. Majority of the above-mentioned articles is based on earlier research projects which utilized remote interviews. These papers analyse data that were not collected with the topic of the changing medium in mind. One of the exceptions to this is the research conducted by Vanessa Hinchcliffe and Helev Gavin, which engaged interviewers and interviewees in a conversation about the mode of interview (Hinchcliffe & Gavin, 2009). This operation allowed authors to explore the experiences of practitioners and to evaluate from their perspective the topics of the ease of use, the comfort of an interviewee, and influence of familiarity with the chosen technology.

This focus on the process of collecting data and analysis of data from prior research limits the array of aspects that can be seen in the changing situation of a qualitative interview. On the one hand, this perspective rarely takes into consideration the social aspect of this research method. Zuzanna Grębecka stated that a qualitative interview is always a cultural practice – the situation of a meeting that is not only focused on the research aim but also engages people involved, their habitus and experiences (Grębecka, 2016). This is not only an important part of every interview but also an element that can be influenced greatly by the change of a medium.

On the other hand, the use of technology to conduct interviews may have greater consequences to this practice due to the change of the used medium. This adjustment – from a face-to-face meeting to mediated communication – cannot be treated as a neutral or meaningless process. Grzegorz Godlewski, an anthropologist, points out that the things we use to say something or to make contact with each other are almost as important as the actual things we are saying (Godlewski, 2008).

As Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin stated, the old and the new media are in a constant process of remediation. This process is the “formal logic by which

new media refashion prior media forms" (Bolter & Grusin, 2000, p. 273). In this process, the new media hold some features of older media and develop or discard the others. Moreover, remediation can also work the other way around, when older media adopt some accomplishments of the new media. Janet Murray develops this concept by defining remediation as the process of reproducing the conventions or/and content of one medium in another one (Murray, 2011). In this perspective, media and their uses – as in the case of qualitative interviews – always borrow from each other and influence each other. As stated by Eric Havelock, the change of medium can be treated as a spectacle in which the researcher sees the specificity of engaged media and in which some aspects of practices that use those media become more visible and prominent (Havelock, 2007).

By using the perspective of researchers who practice in-person and remote interviews, this article aims to contribute towards a wider analysis of qualitative interviews, which takes into consideration their mediated change and the context of qualitative research as a social practice. In this regard, this article proposes possible new topics for the discussion on conducting qualitative interviews with the use of new technologies.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Data for this analysis comes from research conducted by the author in 2019. The research main topic was the situation of remote interviews from the perspective of researchers. The research aim was to collect differentiated data; therefore, recruited participants had diverse experience and practice in conducting qualitative research. Each of the twelve respondents had experience in at least two research fields including public, academic, and commercial research. Among the participants, there were students (MA and PhD) and academic lecturers, as well as public and commercial researchers – graduates of sociology, anthropology, and ethnography from various universities from four major cities in Poland. As a result, the collected information extended the perspective and experience of academic education and research. The research used the method of semi-structured qualitative interviews to capture diverse and in-depth data.

Grębecka describes the qualitative interview as a particular practice, always "very self-aware and self-reflective" and subject to constant self-reflection (Grębecka, 2016, p. 299). The anthropologist points out that interviews as a research method are often analysed in anthropological and ethnographical papers. In addition, as all qualitative research methods, interview should always be carried out with the above-mentioned self-reflection that aims to show acquired knowledge in the context of potentials and limitations of the used research methods. As stated by one of the research participants:

If it is a reliable qualitative research, it must be aware of its limitations. This means that qualitative research is so specific, that there are so many factors out there, that you always have to explain how you carry it out and why. You cannot just say: "it was an in-depth interview, goodbye". But if you want to delve deep into it, you need to specify the type of interview, where it was carried out, with whom, why so and not otherwise. What I mean is that a lot of factors come into play and you have to be aware of them.¹

The topic of the conducted research and its participants were chosen because of this self-awareness. Practitioners who conduct qualitative interviews have to be self-reflective and have to constantly check the adequacy of their own methods. For this reason, the conducted interviews were able to cover many layers and facets of interviews that are not only specific to one medium but characterise this research method in general.

LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

The data collected in the research greatly exceed the material analysed in this article. This choice has been made because of the aim of this article, which is to show the aspects of changing the medium in qualitative research, the subject often overlooked in the literature. The conducted study had inherent limitations that should be considered and addressed in future research. The research was based on qualitative interviews that aimed at obtaining in-depth information about the experiences, attitudes, and self-awareness of individual researchers. Therefore, it does not present general knowledge that would be adequate and suitable in every context. The research was conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic which could change some of the communication habits in our society under the rules of isolation. As such, issues presented below could be developed and advanced in further research with other participants who possess different knowledge and experiences.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Qualitative interviews are often perceived as one of many research methods that aim to collect in-depth data. As described above, many papers addressing the topic of remediation of interviews concentrate on this layer. However, qualitative interviews – especially those with roots in ethnographic research – are considered to be much more composite. For example, one of the researchers who participated in the research stated:

If someone is educated in carrying out interviews in such an anthropological narrative, they have a whole range of values added to them. That is, we are talking about a conversation rather than an interview. It is not based on a simple extraction or questioning. We are aware of such relations of domination and subordination and

¹ Every quotation presented in a separate paragraph (block quote) comes from interviews conducted by the author in the research process described in the "Research methodology" section.

equal status. That we are talking about a meeting. These are all such humanistic and social values that are added to the technique of interview.

As explained by Grębecka, a qualitative interview is not only a method of collecting information. It is a social situation that engages the people involved, their habitus and experiences. It is always both a meeting and an interview (Grębecka, 2016, p. 298). Concern regarding the possible loss of those aspects was expressed by one of the participants. In her opinion, the interview:

is a specific field meeting situation. Maybe that is why ethnology and ethnography are used so little in the context of new media – they lack what constitutes ethnography: fieldwork situation, the moment of meeting the other person. All the time, we think that this ethnology, ethnography is ... this ambiguous fieldwork situation which, after all, consists of this contact: "I-in-the-field", "I-with-my-interlocutor" without any unnecessary mediation. In this sense, this mediation makes this relationship unclean, disturbed.

The importance of the meeting as a part of the qualitative interview was present in all conducted interviews. Researchers were referring to it in various contexts. Firstly, it was connected with the quality and validity of the interview as a method. Meeting and getting to know the interviewee are crucial parts of the interview regarded as a conversation which purpose is to understand another human being – not as a source of information, but as a complex person with relation to the gathered data (Kvale, 2010). One of the research participants added:

Let us contrast two situations. A situation in which I talk to a living person whom I see, with whom I am in the same space, and a situation in which I talk to someone whom I have never met, and in addition I talk to him or her only on the phone or on Skype with no video. It is much easier for me to depersonalise and treat such a person only as a source of information, someone who will be for me just a voice on the phone or a voice on the computer. But it is different if it is a human being who takes up physical space, whom I see and whom I smell...

The situation described in this quote is not only important because it refers to the ethical side of the interview as a research method. The researcher also noticed that the indicated problem can be dependent on herself – the interviewer. It is easier to depersonalise a person when interviewing him or her virtually, but it is not an inherent part of that type of communication. In this way remediation of interviews reminds us about ourselves – researchers using various methods with our personal attitudes and experiences.

Secondly, the remediated meeting presented above loses an important context of the interview conducted face-to-face – the off-the-record part:

Of course that the thing about talking on Skype is that when you call someone you do not know, you immediately start a conversation ... After the conversation, there was no room for anything, in the sense that I no longer had the need to go on about the topic somehow, I also did not want to use too much of their time. The situation of the meeting (face-to-face, MŁ) also suggests a bit how this conversation would most often end, it's like if you do not know someone, you get close to each other, so, you just talk a little while after this interview. It is rare that I turn off the voice

recorder and be like: "okay, thank you" and I get up. Usually, it continues somehow – for a shorter or longer moment.

This continuation can be valid to the research process. While talking after the recording, the interviewees often remind themselves about something they can add or expand on the information they provided in more formal situation of the interview.

This is regarded not only as a way to obtain new information, but also a chance to build a better rapport before the conversation. Meeting a new person and trying to build a mutual rapport is considered a crucial part of the in-depth interview which is also subject to remediation. In interviews conducted through technology, some researchers suggest that it should have been carried over to some other forms of communication. Hannah Deakin and Kelly Wakefield used a series of emails they exchanged with interviewees prior to the conversation to overcome those issues associated with building initial rapport (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014).

Moreover, a qualitative interview in the research was described as a social practice that extends beyond simply knowing the interviewee as a part of the research process. There are other sides to this meeting that may change even further with the change of the medium. As noticed by one of the researchers:

For me, the meeting is very important ... With Skype, the conversation starts and ends, it has one goal. As if it does not extend above that often. And in a face-to-face meeting there are situations in which, however, you do prolong it and you start to talk outside of the interview. And then a lot of information appears that is related to the topic of the study, but other things may also appear. I recently had an interview where I ate dinner with this guy, we sat, talked, talked about horrors, which I am afraid of and he loves. And there was an hour of additional conversation which was just a nice social meeting. That is a part of it for me too.

This situation shows that the interview is a social practice beyond the aim of the research alone. It is the interpersonal meeting in a social way. Some researchers are interested in meeting new people not only for the purpose of the conducting research, but for their own interest and curiosity. Once again, remediation reveals the researcher as a person. A person who is important in the process of gathering information and beyond it. A person who has his or her own attitudes and needs.

One of the participants stated that he does not want to conduct a study of a culture or society which is focused only on conversations mediated through technology. In his own words, it is just not for him. Remediation can deprive researchers of something often overlooked, but important in the research process:

New technologies do not allow that. They do not, they make it (the communication, MŁ) too short, it is focused on the effect, on-execution-off. Rather, it is hard to imagine that you both drink coffee and just cut off an hour-long conversation on a random topic after that. And this is why you cannot get to know each other.

Another researcher emphasised her own attitude in the situation of an interview:

There is this moment when I conduct interviews for myself and while doing them, I can meet the person, I think I need to fight for that meeting. It gives a lot. Especially now when I realised how convenient the interviews via Skype are ... But for me this meeting is quite valuable and I think we should fight for it.

As stated by Pierre Bourdieu, when researching the practice, the researcher has to always think about people who are practising it (Chartier & Bourdieu, 2019). He or she needs to try to understand the aims, attitudes, and needs of the practitioners to comprehend the practice. And in the case of qualitative interviews, there are always at least two of them. Grębecka noticed that interviews are always practised by the interviewer and the interviewee (Grębecka, 2016). This is the most important in analysing remediation within the research method. In articles about the conversations conducted by emails or Skype, the authors often focus only on the interviewee's side. As stated by Deakin and Wakefield, there can be participants who may be excluded due to technological competence (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). On the other hand, thanks to the use of technology, participants can stay in their chosen environment, where they feel comfortable (Iacono, Symonds, & Brown, 2016).

However, the same can be applied to the researchers and their knowledge and experience with technology. Some participants of the research noticed that it can be difficult for some interviewees to participate in an interview conducted through technology and it can create a stressful situation. However, some of the interviewers stated that it may also relate to them. It depends on their own use of technology and their experience with it. One of the researchers commented that the use of technology may be beneficial for some interviewees but not for them. This places them in a situation in which they are less familiar with the medium than their interlocutors, while it is their task to control and carry on the conversation.

Moreover, this is an issue of the education process which avoids the topic of mediated interviews almost as a whole. As noticed by one of the interviewed researchers:

It seems to me that it is a clash of the tendency to remain in the sphere of comfort on one hand, which can, for example, be recognised, made aware of by an ethnographer and justified; for example, you can say: "I will carry out interviews the way that keeps me in the comfort zone because then I am able to function better as a researcher, better understand my interlocutor, because my emotional state does not distract me." This may be unconscious but rationalised by the good of the research. And then someone can tell you: "you know, because a real interview, in order to be successful, must happen in real life, face-to-face, you have to be in the same space with your respondent, because the methodology requires it." And really, if you bury deeper, it turns out that they use this rationalisation as they are not doing so well with some new types of communication. And that they are afraid of it.

Once again, this is not an inherent feature of the new media, but rather an issue of how it is used and by whom. What was the most visible in conducted interviews was the fact of being together in the situation of the interview and beyond it:

Maybe I think stereotypically, but a meaningful part of my interlocutors, if they are with someone, it is directly. In the sense that it's a rather natural way of being together for them. Because I had the majority of older people. If I would do it with people our age, the argument is that being there directly together... in the sense that you can be together while being online. I think they would buy it.

Being together as a form of social relation is an important aspect of the qualitative interview, but – as stated in the above quote – this statement is often based on participants' experiences and attitudes. Hence, most of the interviewed researchers pointed out that interviews conducted remotely can lose this important trait. Not generally, but for them personally. An academic lecturer noticed about her students that:

It is much more obvious to them that [an interview] is a communicational situation. But it also may be a communicational situation conducted with new media. It does not have to be necessarily a face-to-face conversation in the same space. It does not have to be a 'real' meeting.

But, as she stated afterwards, she knows that she was raised in another communicational situation. She and other researchers stated that they are getting used to technologies and the Internet in society and in their own lives. Some of them noticed that in everyday life they are practising being together through technology. Some researchers with whom the author talked during the pandemic see it now even more. However, transferring this to qualitative interviews was not an easy task then and it is not easier now.

CONCLUSIONS

Interviews with researchers presented in this article prove that changing the way qualitative interviews are conducted has consequences that increase differences in obtaining research data. When the qualitative interview is analysed as a social practice that engages the interviewer as well as the interviewee it requires re-thinking. It is a meeting that utilises communication habits and experiences from both sides of the conversation. Though often overlooked in the body of literature, the researcher has his or her own customs, knowledge, skills, and needs which play an important role in every interview. As stated in this article, some features that are seen as inseparably connected with the new media may be associated with the communicational experiences and habits of the people involved.

This conclusion is important especially nowadays, during a worldwide pandemic of 2020. Guidelines of social distancing and isolation measures are changing many communicational situations and may transform social practices and habits. These are the new circumstances that should be considered in the further analysis of potential and usability of the remote qualitative interviews.

REFERENCES

- [1] Abrams, K. M., Wang, Z., Song, Y. J., & Galindo-Gonzalez, S. (2015). Data richness trade-offs between face-to-face, online audiovisual, and online text-only focus groups. *Social Science Computer Review*, 33(1), 80–96.
- [2] Bampton, R., Cowton, C., & Downs, Y. (2013). The e-interview in qualitative research. In: N. Sappleton (Ed.), *Advancing Social and Business Research Methods with New Media Technology* (pp. 329-343). IGI Global, Hershey, PA, USA.
- [3] Bolter, J., & Grusin, R. (2000). *Remediation. Understanding New Media*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- [4] Burns, E. (2010). Developing email interview practices in qualitative research. *Sociological Research Online*, 15(4), 1–12.
- [5] Chartier, R., & Bourdieu, P. (2019). Lektura: praktyka kulturowa. Debata między Pierre'em Bourdieu i Rogerem Chartierem. In: Chartier, R. *Czy książki wywołują rewolucje? Szkice z historii książki, lektury i kultury piśmiennej* [Do books make revolutions? Sketches from the history of book, lecture and literate culture] (pp. 283-302). Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego.
- [6] Deakin, H., & Wakefield, K. (2014). Skype interviewing: reflections of two PhD researchers. *Qualitative Research*, 5, 603-616.
- [7] Glassmeyer, D. M., & Dibbs, R.-A. (2012). Researching from a distance: Using live web conferencing to mediate data collection. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 11(3), 292–302.
- [8] Godlewski, G. (2008). *Słowo – pismo – sztuka słowa. Perspektywy antropologiczne* [Word – writing – art of word. Anthropological perspectives]. Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego.
- [9] Grębecka, Z. (2016). Legnickie opowieści o PRL-u. Prowadzenie wywiadu etnograficznego jako praktyka profesjonalna i międzyludzka. In: G. Godlewski, A. Karpowicz, M. Rakoczy (Eds.), *Antropologia praktyk językowych* [Anthropology of language practices] (pp. 298-324). Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego.
- [10] Hanna, P. (2012). Using Internet technologies (such as Skype) as a research medium: a research note. *Qualitative Research*, 12(2), 239–242.
- [11] Havelock, E. (2007). *Przedmowa do Platona* [Preface to Plato]. Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego.
- [12] Hinchcliffe V., & Gavin, H. (2009). Social and virtual networks: Evaluating synchronous online interviewing using instant messenger. *The Qualitative Report*, 2, 318-340.
- [13] Holt, A. (2010). Using the telephone for narrative interviewing: A research note. *Qualitative Research*, 10(1), 113–121.
- [14] Iacono, V., Symonds, P., & Brown, D. (2016). Skype as a tool for qualitative research interviews. *Sociological Research Online*, 2. Retrieved May 25, 2020, from <https://www.socresonline.org.uk/21/2/12.html>
- [15] Irving, A. (2011). Duration, dominance and depth in telephone and face-to-face interviews: A comparative exploration. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 10(3), 202-220.
- [16] Johnson, D. R., Scheitle, C. P., & Ecklund, E. H. (2019). Beyond the in-person interview? How interview quality varies across in-person, telephone, and Skype interviews. *Social Science Computer Review*, 1, 1-17.
- [17] Kvale, S. (2010). *Prowadzenie wywiadów* [Conducting interviews]. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- [18] Lupton, D. (Ed.) (2020). *Doing fieldwork in a pandemic (crowd-sourced document)*, pp. 1-39. Retrieved May 25, 2020, from <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1cGjGABB2h2qbduTgqfribHmog9B6P0NvMgVuiHZCl8/edit?ts=5e88ae0a#>
- [19] Murray, J. (2011). *Inventing Medium: Principles of Interaction Design as Cultural Practice*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- [20] Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (2011). *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- [21] Sade-Beck, L. (2004). Internet ethnography: Online and offline. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 3(2), 45-51.
- [22] Seitz, S. (2016). Pixelated partnerships, overcoming obstacles in qualitative interviews via Skype: a research note. *Qualitative Research*, 16(2), 229–235.