A clear case of 'virtucoolness :P'. Conducting discussion groups in online communities.

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Abstract

Because of technological developments, it has never been easier to use the online domain as a research environment. Online questionnaires are already mainstream research practice, as well as analysing news groups, forum discussions and websites. Researchers are exploring the ethnographic possibilities of online communities by interviewing community members via e-mail. But still, most researches depend on textual analysis or a-synchronous communication with research subjects (for example through e-mail). In some cases, researchers arrange offline meetings with the respondents they have contacted on the Internet. However, meeting respondents online and carrying out discussion groups with avatars in their own virtual environment is still quite unusual.

In this article several issues concerning organizational, methodological and ethical aspects surrounding online discussion groups in a virtual environment are explored. The article does not intend to provide a recipe or guideline for organizing these groups. It first and foremost illustrates a selection of interesting and important issues that researchers might encounter in the online domain. Some are also common issues in more general research, but have different consequences online. The illustrations are based on the authors' personal experiences with approximately 40 Habbos, which were met during online discussion groups in April 2007.

Introduction

Directly after I had sent .:MissEmmie:.[1] *(real name Emma, eleven years old) an e-mail to thank her for signing up to participate in my online discussion group, I received a message from her. It said: "I did not enter my name for this research! And as a matter of fact: who are you actually?" This was not what I had expected. I immediately replied, apologizing to her. Apparently, somebody else had filled in her e-mail address online. I wrote to her that I would delete her name and e-mail address from my database. One second after I had pushed the send-button, a second message arrived: "Sorry about this last e-mail, I had forgotten. It sounds like fun!" So I asked her if she would still like to participate. I only had to wait for 30 seconds. "Yes please, but I still have a question what's your name on Habbo? And in your message it says I have to come at a certain time… what time is that…well… hope you understand ;)"*

This is only one out of many interactions characterizing the research within the Habbo Hotel community. The example illustrates the speed and relative ease with which young people are expressing themselves online. The quantity and diversity of this communication, and the curiosity and enthusiasm of the respondents were surprising. Actual research practice turned out to be much more colourful and dynamic than expected beforehand. The research process furthermore provided many interesting issues; some concerning research in general, others specifically relevant for researching in virtual environments. In this article several organizational, methodological and ethical aspects of carrying out online research in virtual environments are explored. This exploration is based on the writer's personal experience with 42 Habbo Hotel users who where met during online discussion groups in April 2007.

Article outline

First, a selection of methodological literature about online research will be highlighted. Secondly, the Habbo Hotel case study and the research set-up will pass in review. Based on this research, the article will successively deal with organizational issues (speed, clearness, flexibility and dedication), methodological issues (scope, reliability and attendance), and ethical issues (consent, privacy and reward) concerning online discussion groups. The objective of this article is, on the one hand, to contribute to the growing body of literature exchanging research experiences about the online domain, and, on the other hand, to inspire researchers to explore the online domain as a research environment.

[1] Respondents' names in this article are fictitious. All respondent quotes are translated by the author from Dutch into English, preserving the original punctuation.

Conducting online research

Already in 1999, Steven Jones edited a book entitled *Doing Internet Research*. It provided critical issues and methods for examining the "phenomenon of the World Wide Web" as it was called in those days. The book was mainly directed at computer-mediated communication (CMC) and its use in research practices. In one of the chapters, Witmer et al. (1999) stated that the practice of doing online research raised questions about the very nature of this type of research. Does online research demand medium-specific methodology? This question still remains a topical subject. In *Virtual Methods*, a book edited by Hines in 2005, several scholars explored the shift from offline to online research (or a combination of the two). By presenting different case studies, the authors showed how the Internet was changing established methodological assumptions and practices; for example, how researchers had to deal with privacy issues or establish trust online. One of the key points of the book was that conducting research through online relationships was possible. According to Hines (2005:19) "contrary to previous doubts, effective qualitative research relationships can be forged online". What are the differences between offline and online research?

According to Mann and Stewart (2000: 17), Internet facilitates many research aspects. This is the largest advantage of conducting online research. Through the Internet, researchers have extended access to participants, space barriers are diminished. It is possible to meet up with users from all over the country – or even all over the world. Secondly, there are cost as well as time savings involved (see also Frankel and Siang 1999: 1). You don't need time to travel, there are no costs involved to arrange for a meeting place and there are no tape recording and transcription costs. Methodologically, the transcription of the dialogue is carried out by a computer without transcription bias and the data are digitally more easily handled. Last but not least, an online research is participant-friendly. The threshold to participate in a conversation is most often lower than in a face-to-face conversation, since participants are in their own safe environment. With respect to online ethnography in particular, Rutter and Smith (2005: 84) notice that it surely is a researchers dream: "It does not involve leaving the comforts of your office desk; there are no complex access privileges to negotiate; field data can be easily recorded and saved for later analysis; large amounts of information can be collected quickly and inexpensively".

But organizing online research does not only offer advantages. It also presents some difficulties. One challenge for online research is that the researcher needs to be not only an expert in communication, but also computer literate (Chase and Alvarez 2000). Especially when directly chatting with young respondents in an online environment (as is the case when discussion groups in online environments are organized), researchers need to be able to react (and type) very quickly. It is more difficult to keep discussion groups organized, since you cannot rely on gestures and facial expressions. The respondents are easily distracted and sometimes do not let others finish what they have to say. For a researcher, keeping control within a group of more than four people is more complicated. It is more difficult to maintain the structure of the conversation and discuss all subjects according to plan.

Being in separate rooms during the meeting is also a challenge. It makes it more difficult for the researcher to control external influences. This lowers the threshold for users to engage in other activities in real life during the meeting, for example getting something to eat, making a telephone call or (in case of the Habbo Hotel meetings) chasing a dragon-fly out of the room. Sometimes, users are forced to leave the conversation permanently. They have to leave for dinner or because another family member needs to use the computer.

Besides participants that disappear temporarily or completely, also technical obstacles can hinder online research. This hindrance is a particular threat to online discussion groups – for they rely entirely on synchronous communication. A slow or instable connection can be a major bottleneck to conduct online research. During the Habbo discussion groups, luckily, there were only minor technical problems, for example one Habbo lost her internet connection every 15 minutes. Another technical constraint in the online Habbo environment was the limitation to the number of characters that could be entered per sentence in the chat balloon. This constraint has also been mentioned by Chase and Alvarez (2000). This sometimes was a hindrance of communication, since participants had to use two text balloons to type one sentence.

Case study Habbo Hotel

This article is based on research that was conducted in the online environment, Habbo Hotel. Habbo Hotel is developed by the Finnish interactive entertainment corporation Sulake in 2000. Sulake provides a digital hotel in 30 countries where users (represented by pixel-style avatars) can walk around, chat

and play games. Habbo Hotel allows users to create and develop their own identity online and decorate a Hotel room where they can invite their friends. This has been taken up by users on a large scale. In September 2007, 78 million Habbo avatars were created worldwide (http://www.sulake.com). The research discussed in this article focuses on Habbo Hotel in the Netherlands. The Netherlands accounts for more than 4.4 million avatars, of which approximately 500,000 are online every month. To underline the magnitude of this user base, it can be compared to another large online community, Second Life. Although Second Life has received a lot of media attention lately, this grown-up counterpart of Habbo Hotel only has around 9.5 million users *worldwide*, of which 10 percent (approximately 950,000 users) are online every month (http://www.secondlife.com).

The Habbo Hotel case is part of an exploratory research focusing on changing user roles in online media and entertainment services and the way these roles influence the relationship between users and businesses. Habbo provides an interesting case because users are the backbone of the service. Furthermore, Habbo Hotel employs a viable and interesting business model – relying mostly on the sale of Habbo credits instead of income derived from advertising.

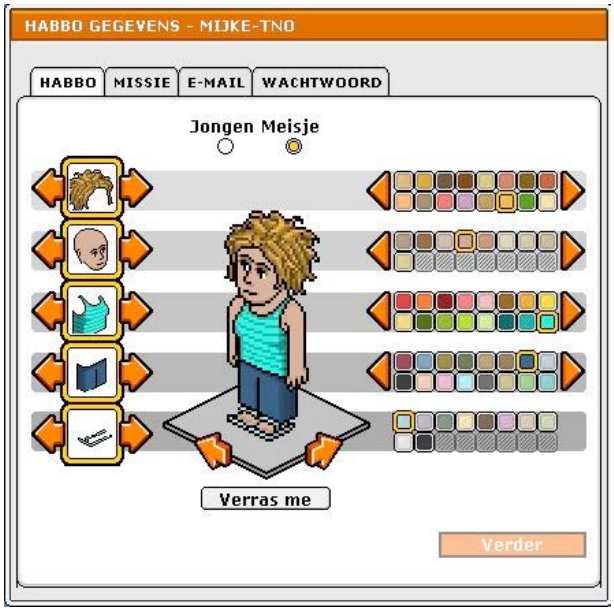
Research set-up

As a first exploration of the interactions between users and producers in Habbo Hotel, desk research, management interviews, an online user survey and online discussion groups were combined. First, by means of desk research and interviews with the Habbo Hotel management, the business behind Habbo Hotel was analyzed. Besides general information about technical and organizational issues, the role of the users in the business model was clarified. An online survey was carried out to generate knowledge about the users and the roles users were taking on. Building on this information, 12 online discussion groups were organized in Habbo Hotel. These discussion groups were used to elicit in-depth information about some interesting themes and research results.

Group members were selected by means of an online call. They had to indicate their e-mail address, age and if they were Habbo Club Member or not. Habbos below the age of 13 had to provide their parents' e-mail addresses as well. More than 4,000 Habbos responded to the call. They were divided into groups and from these groups the participants were selected (at random).

The discussion groups were held in a Habbo-research room in Habbo Hotel. Facilitated by the Habbo staff, the research room was decorated with couches, plants, a desk, bookshelves and even a soft drink machine (see Picture 1). The sessions lasted one hour each, and approximately three to four Habbos visited the room every session. To keep uninvited guests from entering the room, it had a password which was e-mailed to the participants before the session started. They were explicitly asked to keep this password confidential. The session rules were explained in the e-mail containing the session password. By entering a code before each session started, the chat log was automatically saved and the same time the session closed, the chat log was automatically send to the researcher's e-mail address.

Picture 1 Habbo research room



Picture 2 Habbo research avatar

Organizational issues: speed, flexibility and structure

Organizing online discussion groups requires dedication and flexibility. Furthermore, structure and clearness are very important issues - maybe even more crucial in online than in offline meetings. In the following paragraphs, speed, flexibility and structure will be discussed.

Speed and flexibility

Researching teenagers in online environments requires a lot of organizational efforts. First of all, as a researcher, you need to act fast. This can be best illustrated by the course of the responses to the online call for participation. The call was placed on the Habbo Hotel general website. On the first day, more than 80 percent of the total number of respondents reacted (see Figure 1). Day two accounted for 12 percent, day three for 5 percent, day four for 1.6 percent and days five to ten yielded only 0.4 percent of all participants. This indicates that the majority of respondents will react during the first couple days. Keeping a call online for weeks will not be of much added value.

Other research results corroborate these figures. Larsen and Rathod (2004: 6) state that the first twenty-four hours of an online survey are the most important. Approximately 60 percent of their respondents responded within the first twenty-four hours. This percentage is somewhat lower compared to the 80 percent response rate of Habbo users. This difference can't be explained by the demographic profile of the respondents – Habbo users being younger than the average respondent in the Larsen and Rathod research. Larsen and Rathod have investigated the differences between gender and age groups, and the differences in these responses are negligible. Other accounts about response rates are practically absent. This raises questions about possible explanations. Maybe the research setting – a lively online community – has contributed to this high turnout. This might be an interesting issue for further research.

The observation that speed is very important in online research also holds for the reactions to the first e-mail. In one day, 40 percent had reacted. Habbos are very communicative, and react very fast. As the example at the beginning of this article illustrates, some of them use e-mail as if it were a direct chat application. Also Orgad (2005: 51) mentions that in her online research (conducted through e-mail) she was "bombarded" with questions by her respondents. This also was the case in the Habbo research. Most of the Habbos who were invited to join the online discussion groups send a lot of e-mails, full of questions. The average number of e-mails per respondent was approximately four. There were a lot of direct responses. For example:

"Yes, I still have one question Why did you choose me for this study?
And who are the other people that are chosen?
The question why did you choose me does not indicate that I do not want to participate I hope you know that ;)"

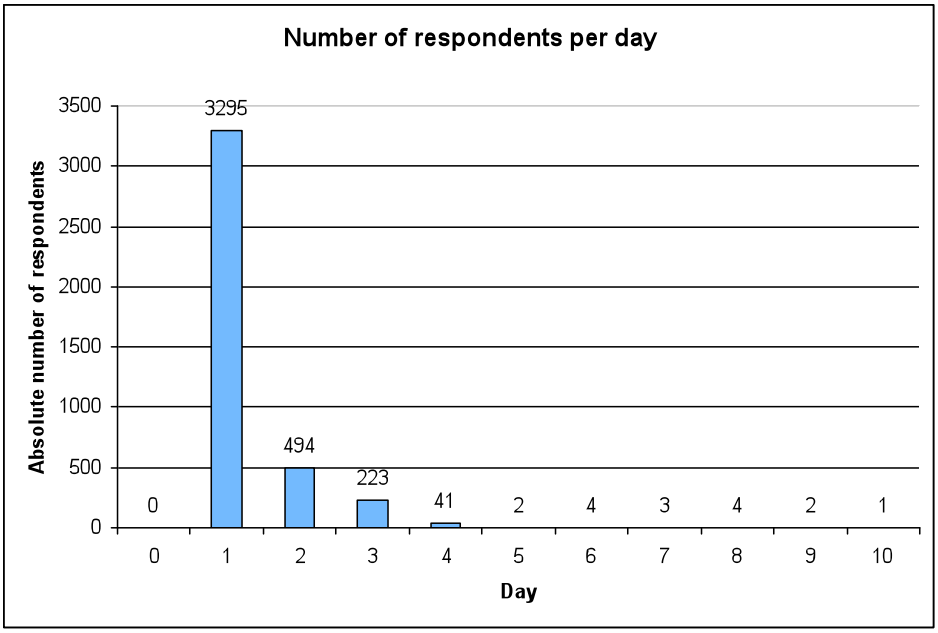


Figure 1 Absolute response over time research call

The Habbos were expecting a fast reaction in return as well. This is supported by Orgad's observation that prompt replies are important to establish a form of trust between researcher and respondent. Responding within one day is a way to ensure the respondent that the researcher is real, serious and committed to the research. In the Habbo Hotel research for example, every participant knew that they would receive the password to the sessions ten minutes before the session would start. One of the Habbos was already online one hour before the session started. She was rather anxious, because she couldn't make it to the first session. She was promised that she could join another group, and that she would receive this password through her Habbo console. Before she even received this password, she wrote an e-mail:

"Please respond!
Otherwise it will never happen
Because I have to leave at half past 1"

If the Habbos would not answer within two days, it was very unlikely that they would answer at all. A few Habbos did react after a long while, but they were already too late to participate in the discussion groups. This was very disappointing for them, since they would have liked participating very much. Response time indicates that through Internet, most young respondents react very fast – or not at all. After two or three days, sending a second reminder e-mail to the non-respondents is a very valuable thing. This will yield more responses than just waiting for a week. In any case, doing online research and organizing online discussion groups is a very intensive endeavour for a limited period of time.

Structure

In online environments it is sometimes difficult to keep a clear overview when meeting with virtual characters. To prevent the meetings from turning into chaos, the participants received some rules via e-mail. One of these rules explained that everybody should try to let others finish their sentences; otherwise the discussion would turn into a hen-house. To facilitate the discussion, another rule was introduced. Habbos do have the opportunity to move about in Habbo Hotel. They can walk, but also make a small dance and wave to each other. Habbos had to wait their turn as much as possible, and if they really had important comments, they could wave. Waving proved to be very helpful in guiding the discussion. Waving Habbos could be given precedence.

It needs to be underlined that guiding a discussion online is very intensive. Facial expression is absent in online discussions (except for emoticons). As Kivits (2005: 35) describes: "(..) the simple gestures of nodding, agreeing or eye interrogation are (…) not possible". The research Kivits is writing about is taking place primarily through e-mail. For an online meeting, translating visual elements of a conversation into textual cues is probably even more important. A waving Habbo can't see that he or she is noticed. Therefore, as a researcher you need to keep structure verbally, by text. This means that Habbos need to be notified in text that they have been spotted and that they will be next in the discussion. This also implicates that, as a researcher, you are occupied with many things at the same time – keeping track of the question or subject list, giving turns to participants, indicating they are noticed, reacting to their comments by asking clarifying questions and paying attention to the fact that other Habbos might be waving.

Netiquette during online sessions is very important. Participants need to be polite to each other. In one of the sessions, one Habbo was a bit disappointed about the discussion group. He thought that the research involved engaging in some kind of exiting research on Habbo, exploring rooms and finding out secrets. He thought being in a group with other Habbos only talking was a bit dull. A clear indication of his annoyance was that he kept asking when the research was going to start (while it had already begun). Other Habbos in the group pointed out to him that the session had already started. As a response, he started to type in capitals. AS YOU MIGHT NOTICE, TYPING CAPS LOCK IS SORT OF SHOUTING. Some of the participants asked him to stop typing in caps lock. When he refused, he was told that if he was feeling bored in this conversation, he was allowed to leave the room. And he left.

How to respond to participants that do not want to keep to the rules? In the first place, it is important that you have the opportunity to dismiss somebody from the sessions or call in for help. In the Habbo research, a safety net was built in. During the hours of the meetings, the Habbo Hotel moderators were paying extra attention to possible distress calls from the Habbo research room. Every Habbo has one button to call the moderators if another Habbo is bothering them. In case of emergency, this button could be used. Fortunately, that was never necessary. Practically all Habbos kept to the rules during the sessions. When the Habbos were asked if they had read the rules, they all say they had, and some repeated them – one Habbo says: "yes of course – no hen-house. *walking through the room, flapping wings* cluck-cluck" (If online an action is placed between stars, a character pretends to do this).

One other example: Habbos were requested to keep the password for the Habbo room a secret. The Habbo staff feared that, during sessions, the password would be spread and uninvited Habbos would come in to disturb the session. In an e-mail it was explained to the Habbos that they were the only ones invited to the session. If other Habbos would enter the discussion group uninvited, the whole session would be forced to shut down. Some Habbos were really making an effort to keep the password safe, even if their friends were asking them about it. Only during one session an uninvited guest entered the room. The other Habbos reacted displeased – they feared that the session would be shut down altogether. They asked the uninvited Habbo to leave. He was also asked to leave the room by the researcher. He refused. After changing the password, the uninvited guest was 'kicked' out of the room. This is another possibility in Habbo Hotel. Every room owner can evict other Habbos from his or her room. This turned out to be an effective measure.

Methodological issues: scope, reliability and attendance

Is it difficult to gather enough respondents online? How reliable are these respondents and what about attendance during online discussion groups? Does the Internet hamper these methodological issues? In the next paragraphs, scope, reliability and attendance will be discussed.

Scope

Some researchers organizing user surveys or audience research involving questionnaires mention that respondents are getting tired of all researches they have to answer to. This is a real problem for response; it is a difficult task to get enough people to fill in a questionnaire or give an interview. This issue seemed of no importance at all in the Habbo Hotel online research. The online questionnaire yielded more than 3200 respondents. Of these respondents, more than 2800 agreed to participate in the follow-up of the research by filling in their e-mail addresses. Apparently within this young target audience, the willingness to participate is much higher than in general population.

Because it was already half a year since the questionnaire was online, another call was posted on the Habbo website to gather participants for the online discussion groups. This was more efficient than trying out many e-mail addresses that might not exist anymore. In the online call, a reference was made to the research half a year ago. Habbos were invited to fill in their age, gender, e-mail address and they were requested to indicate if they were Habbo club members. Within a few days, 4070 Habbos filled in this form. This group provided a large pool of Habbos from which the discussion groups could easily be compiled.

Reliability

It needs to be underlined that, although online research (especially online questionnaires) probably will yield many responses, bias is likely. Because of self-selection, especially the more active and dedicated users will respond to the online call. Since they visit the service more often, they will probably see the call sooner than less active users. Also in the Habbo research, it was evident that the majority of respondents were dedicated Habbo Hotel users. It needs to be realized that short-term or occasional users are therefore underrepresented in the study.

In the online questionnaire, this can be derived from the fact that (1) most respondents have been online for more than a year and (2) the percentage of Habbos who are spending money on their Habbo account exceeds fifty percent. This is much higher than the percentage of spenders that Habbo Hotel reports (9 percent). Also in the response for the online discussion groups, this bias shows very clearly. The percentage of Habbos who are Habbo Club members is 63. Compared to the overall Habbo Hotel figure of 5 percent, this is remarkable. In the discussion groups this was compensated for by inviting more non-members than members. But this does not eliminate the bias from the research. Asking Habbos about their Habbo history, they often stated that they have been visiting Habbo Hotel for over a year.

Some researchers question the reliability of responses in the online domain. Their argument is that it is not possible to identify respondents online. Since respondents can fill in questionnaires anonymously, it is much easier to pretend to be somebody else or fill in the questionnaire multiple times. Also in online discussion groups, participants can deliberately mislead the researcher. According to Hines (2005: 18) "any difference between the ways that people present themselves online and offline is (…) a potential methodological drawback for the generalizability of research findings".

To counter the problem of respondents filling in a questionnaire multiple times, Joinson (2005) states researchers can check for multiple IP addresses, set cookies to recognize respondents' computers or use usernames and passwords. These options proved non-viable in the Habbo research. It is impracticable to check IP addresses. Sometimes, one computer is used by several persons, for instance a school computer. Furthermore it is not practical to ask users their Habbo names either – most people have more than one Habbo avatar. However, there were other indicators to estimate whether users were filling in the questionnaire seriously. To prevent users from filling in the initial Habbo Hotel questionnaire more than once, users deliberately were *not* offered a reward (for example *furni* – digital furniture). By doing so, users were not tempted to fill in multiple questionnaires. Furthermore, the questionnaire was rather long (45 questions), so it would have taken users a lot of time to respond multiple times. An indication that most users filled in the questionnaire seriously, was given by the last question. The users were asked if they were willing to participate in a follow-up of the research. This question yielded almost 2800 unique e-mail addresses (Slot 2007).

There is no recipe to measure the extent to which participants pretend to be someone else in online discussion groups. It can never be excluded that someone is lying, but this is also the case in face-to-face research. As a researcher, you need to interact with your respondents to get a feeling whether they are honest or not. In the Habbo Hotel discussion groups, the Habbos seemed very straightforward. There was no direct reason to pretend to be someone else. Many Habbos indicated that on Habbo Hotel they can be more themselves than in real life. They confessed to being shy or teased at school, but in Habbo Hotel they had friends they could talk to. And since every Habbo avatar has (sort of) the same looks, users do not get judged by the way they look in real life.

Although Internet first and foremost enables users to be themselves (people often disclose more about themselves), it also provides users with the opportunity to "spice up" their character a little (see for example Valkenburg et al. 2006; Joinson 2005). Many Habbos agree that, sometimes, Habbos lie about their age or their possessions – but they seemed very honest about this in the discussion groups. To illustrate this; one Habbo sent an e-mail before the meetings:

> *"Is it okay if I ask you for a favour :D?*
> *Well, I do it anyway :P*
> *In RL (Real Life) I am only 11 years old xD*
> *But on Habbo I pretend to be a 16 year old :P*
> *Do you mind if I keep it that way :D*
> *Being anonymous is so much fun :P*

It is not very likely that researchers will get this kind of request in real life. Since his real age was known, this could be taken into account rather easily during the session. The Habbo was assigned to a mixed age group.

Attendance

More than 4000 Habbos wanted to participate in the online discussion groups. Groups were made, dividing girls and boys into age categories. Within these groups, members and non-members were separated. The group of Habbos below thirteen were also filtered according to e-mail address. Many had filled in their own e-mail address for their parents, or provided an e-mail address that was not believable. These e-mail addresses, for example sounding like xXXkissieXX@hotmail.com or

powerbabe45@msn.com, were deleted from the file. It was unlikely these e-mail addresses would belong to parents. Eighty Habbos were selected in total and received an e-mail; 46 of them responded. These 46 Habbos were divided into discussion groups and invited to come to Habbo Hotel at predefined times. Of these 46 Habbos, ultimately 42 showed up during the sessions (this was a remarkable turnout ,especially since the weather was unseasonably warm for the Netherlands at the end of April).

The Habbos who did not appear during their sessions often sent an e-mail offering their apologies. Various excuses passed in review – they had to go to the dentist; were grounded by their parents and not allowed to use the computer; or were ill. All of them were disappointed not to be able to come. Some of them can be rescheduled and placed in other discussion groups. For the Habbos that were not able to attend these sessions, two supplementary sessions were organized. Habbos who turned up late or left early wrote e-mails as well:

> *"Once again I am very sorry to be this late :$*
> *It was strange because I thought I had just received your e-mail .. and then it was suddenly half past seven =o on a different clock =P*
> *Anyway, it was a lot of fun +)*
> *Maybe I can come again tomorrow, or another time that suits you,*
> *I am having a holiday, so… =)"*

Ethical issues: informed consent, privacy and reward

How to deal with ethical issues while conducting research online? Does the Internet provide difficulties in this case? Should Habbos give their consent for participation, should the parents be notified? Should respondents be rewarded for their effort, and how should privacy be dealt with? In the following paragraph, consent, privacy and reward will pass in review.

Consent

Frankel and Siang (1999) indicate that Internet developments fuel questions about the way social and behavioural research is conducted online. They are specifically concerned with research ethics and legal matters. Internet is providing challenges for one of the more fundamental principles of research ethics; beneficence. This principle requires researchers to "maximize possible benefits from the research and minimize harms and risks to their subjects" (Frankel and Siang 1999: 3). Harms and risks include injury

and death (which are highly unlikely in Internet research), but also, for example, loss of privacy. To warrant participants from being subject to risks, researchers use concepts like informed consent and often guarantee participants confidentiality and protection of privacy. It can be questioned how these concepts are translated into the online domain.

According to Mann and Stewart, informed consent means "giving participants comprehensive and correct information and ensuring that they understand fully what participation would entail, before securing their consent to take part" (2000: 48). Since the Internet provides an unprecedented access to group communication (Frankel & Siang 1999), researchers should be very aware of the risks they are taking, and which information they use for their research (for example information readily available on discussion forums). Special consideration should be provided to 'vulnerable' members of communities, such as children and minors (Ess 2002). Anonymity and the use of pseudonyms could complicate these issues, since researchers do not have certainty about the true identity and age of the respondents.

Do any guidelines exist to indicate whether informed consent is necessary in online social scientific research? Little accounts of this particular matter exist. More generally, in the area of medical research there are very strict guidelines. In the Netherlands, children below 12 years of age should have permission from both their parents to participate as *testee*. In the case of minors between the ages of 12 and 18, both their own and their parent(s)'consent are required. It needs to be stressed that these researches are often conducted in real life and involve a lot of confidential questions for example about health and sexuality. The potential harm of these researches is much more present in this research compared to other research areas. Also in marketing research there are guidelines that indicate children should have their parents' approval before participating. This, of course, is connected to the fact that in the case of marketing research, commercial benefits are pursued.

But this guideline is not necessarily applicable to all forms and strands of online research. Sharf states that some forms of research more likely raise a red flag in this matter than others. In the case of Habbo Hotel, the research themes were not requiring participants to give personal and sensitive information. Participants did opt for participating in the research themselves and were not in danger of any risks. The discussion groups were more like social gatherings in which some Habbo topics were discussed, and no personal information was gathered linking the Habbo avatar to the person in real life.

The Habbos were aware that they entered the research room. And the rules and research set-up was disclosed in e-mail messages.

Nonetheless, the Habbos younger than 13 were asked to provide their parents' e-mail address. These were used to inform them about the research and give them the opportunity to 'opt out' their child. No parent used this option; one even inquired whether he could give his approval for the research. Also the participants themselves were informed about the research goals and the way in which they were participating. On the Habbo website, a message was posted announcing the research. Users could fill in their e-mail address if they were willing to participate in the research. Those selected received an e-mail explaining the research into more detail and asking information to enable scheduling the meetings. One 14 year old did send an e-mail explaining that his parents wanted more information about the research. They received the same information as that which had been sent to the parents of the Habbos below the age of 13.

During the discussion sessions the Habbos were asked about their parents. Some said that their parents had no idea what Habbo Hotel was, but most of them said that they talk to their parents about their activities online. One girl said that her mother had "wished her luck" with the research. And another girl declared that her mother had an account on Habbo Hotel herself.

Privacy

It is very important that privacy is secured, even if the research subject is not concerned. According to Frankel and Siang (1999: 10), invasions of privacy happen "when research participants lose control of the types of personal information revealed about themselves". In the Habbo Hotel case, little personal data were kept, only name and e-mail address. Privacy needed to be secured in two ways. Firstly, in relation to the Habbo Hotel organisation – Habbos should feel safe enough to speak freely about the Habbo staff. Secondly, privacy needed to be secured relative to the outside world. The respondents need to be sure that their personal information, like their e-mail addresses, does not end up in public. This was made explicit to them in an e-mail. To secure the first, agreements were made with the Habbo staff. Since the discussion groups were held in Habbo Hotel, the management would easily have access to the log files. They agreed that they would not use these log files themselves. These files were directly sent to the researcher. Habbo Hotel management would only see the outcomes of the research

in the research report – which was made anonymous. The respondents knew that no Habbo staff member was attending the meetings and that the research report would not contain their names.

Unexpectedly, many Habbos were actually rather disappointed that the research was anonymous. Emmy, for example, thought it was cool to have her name mentioned in the research. Being part of a TNO research would have provided her with a special status, which would generate a lot of attention and new friends for her. Almost all Habbos were of the same opinion. To meet their wishes but also take care of their privacy, the research report was kept anonymous. But to give the Habbos some credits for their participation, a summary was made of some research results, with a special thanks to all Habbos – which were mentioned by Habbo name. This was published in the Habbo newsletter. One Habbo sent an e-mail thanking for the research and how the mentioning of his name had boosted his room attendance. This indicates that young people on the Internet deal with privacy issues differently than adults.

Reward

"Do I get something in return?????????:P"

Some Habbos asked whether they would get a reward for participating in the research. Before starting the research, in consultation with Habbo Hotel management, it was decided not to give the respondents something like credits or furni. First of all, the users had to participate for intrinsic reasons. Rewarding them for participating would be an incentive for filling in the questionnaire multiple times. Secondly, the Habbo management explicitly underlined that most Habbos are very willing to give their opinion for free. But if they get used to getting things in return, their motivation to participate freely would be undermined.

Taking this into consideration, the Habbo that asked for something in return received the following answer: *"In any case you will get eternal gratitude if you participate – isn't that enough? ;-)".* Since the Habbos are not really shy, this Habbo replied: *"But why don't you give us anything then?"* - he obviously needed a more serious response. It was explained to him that of course it was understood that he would like to be rewarded for participating, but that this was not included in the research. He was told that many Habbos participated for fun. If he was only willing to participate in exchange of

something else, another Habbo would be selected to join the discussion groups. This Habbo hurried to say that this was not necessary. *"It was only a question…".*

Concluding

During the past years, the online domain has gained significant importance. Users have become active on many different levels, engaging in all sorts of activities and spending their leisure time in online environments. Naturally, social scientists have also extended their research activities to the Internet. They have adapted many traditional research methods like user surveys, content analysis and ethnographical observation to online circumstances. But meeting respondents in their 'natural online community surroundings' and engaging in synchronous discussion groups with avatars, is still quite exceptional. This article has shed some light onto the opportunities and challenges of organizing online discussion groups; organizational and methodological as well as ethical issues have passed in review.

As can be expected, many methodological guidelines can be translated to the online domain. Also a lot of Internet research practices encounter the same obstacles. For example data collection and ethical issues like privacy need to be approached with extra caution online. Bias is very likely. This needs to be taken into account in the research design. But Internet researchers experience advantages as well. Apart from the difficulties, it is a really valuable effort. It still takes time (and money) to do Internet research, but this costs without doubt significantly less than traditional research. And, more importantly, as a researcher you become a part of your own research subject. In the Habbo research, the online discussion groups proved to be valuable to gain more insights into certain themes.

Unlike some other researcher's experiences, the Habbo target audience was very enthusiastic about participating in online research. Most Habbos say they like participating in their own online environment: *"Yes super cool"* was one reaction. Another Habbo indicated that it was much better to meet online. She was convinced it was easier to put something into words. Habbos like giving their opinion; they come across as honest and speak up when things are unclear. The number of willing participants to the study was extremely high. The response rate of the participants was high, too. This was to some extend similar to other research, but still, it raises some questions. Maybe response to research is likely to be higher when it is properly announced and embedded within online communities.

These observations could be further underpinned by experiences of other online researchers and further investigation.

Another interesting point was the attitude towards participation and privacy respondents in the Habbo research had. Some Habbos really think that being selected for this research is like winning a competition. Some examples: *"I was really shocked when I received the e-mail that I was chosen"*, *"It is the first time that I win something on Habbo"*, or *"I am so happy that I was chosen"*. Other Habbos feel that participating in research provides them with status. One Habbo sent all his friends a message through his Habbo console (the Habbo messaging system) saying: *"Wow! Mijke (she is investigating what everybody thinks of Habbo) responded to my question ;o"* or *"Btw I have Mijke-tno in my friends list ;) you can ASK her anything! Whatever you want. Send your question to me. I will send it to mijke and she will answer ;)".* Of course, this enthusiasm and the great ease with which respondents communicate have consequences for the research as well. Responding to e-mails with comments and questions requires a lot of time.

Another striking issue is the response of participants when privacy issues are explained to them. They react disappointed. This is really in contrast to other research, where participants often refuse to participate because of privacy issues. Habbos like being mentioned to others in the community. This provides them with status and will contribute to their popularity online. The research subject might be of importance in this matter, since the discussion groups did not have a 'high risk' topic. Therefore, respondents did not have to be afraid that privacy sensitive information would come into the public domain. Nonetheless, sometimes it seems privacy is totally lost on the Internet. But is this true? How do people on the Internet perceive privacy? And how does this relates to privacy issues concerning research? The issue of privacy on the Internet will still remain important the coming years.

It is likely that these digital research practices will continue to grow in the coming years. These observations are some of many that are relevant for doing online research and organizing online discussion groups. Hopefully, this article has given other researchers inspiration to explore the online domain as a research environment themselves.

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