Social Research Methods and the Internet 
Research Methods I

Academic Year 2013-14 Michaelmas Term

Day and time: Monday, 9.30-11.30
Location: Seminar Room, OII, 1 St Giles

Course Providers for Michaelmas Term

Dr Jonathan Bright, Professor Bill Dutton (Co-ordinator), Dr Grant Blank, Dr Bernie Hogan, Dr Eric T. Meyer, and Professor Ralph Schroeder [Dr Rebecca Eynon is on research leave this term.]

Comments and enquiries: e-mail william.dutton@oii.ox.ac.uk

Background

Study of the Internet and related information and communication technologies (ICTs) provides new opportunities and challenges for social science research methods. Social Research Methods and the Internet introduces students to the knowledge and skills of value to the conduct and critical evaluation of empirical research on the social shaping of the Internet and its societal implications, as well as introducing the Internet and related digital technologies as tools for social research.

All students must take Research Methods I and Statistics in Michaelmas term. In Hilary term, all students must take Research Methods II and either Advanced Quantitative Analysis or Advanced Qualitative Analysis. Through this methods sequence, students will learn:

1. the significance of alternative methodological approaches that provide the context for theory construction, research design, and the selection of appropriate analytical techniques;
2. to conduct and manage all stages of the research process from developing research questions and hypotheses to disseminating findings;
3. how to devise appropriate research questions and research designs;
4. analytical and interpretive skills for a range of quantitative and qualitative approaches to data collection; and
5. how to use online tools that support the research process (e.g. from statistical software to computer-assisted qualitative analyses).
Overview of Research Methods I

The research methods course sequence at the OII provides students with the opportunity to engage with the basic methodological underpinnings of quantitative and qualitative social science research practices in the context of Internet studies. This includes material on research designs and the development of research questions and empirical approaches across multiple methods. Students explore traditional social research methods that can be applied to the study of the Internet and related information and communication technologies (ICTs), but with an emphasis on emerging social research tools that can be applied to social research – digital social research. They are introduced to all steps of research in ways that they can understand the inter-relationships across all phases of the research process.

Themes developed throughout this course include:

- The relationships between theoretical expectations, research questions, and empirical observations
- The strengths and weaknesses of different methodological approaches
- Theories and methods of sampling along with approaches to the study of whole populations
- Data collection and management
- Introductions to qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods of analysis
- Theoretical and empirical concepts in quantitative and qualitative research
- Ethical principles and norms across disciplines and in digital social research
- Threats to the reliability and validity of data and methods

Course Objectives

1. Introduce a range of methods and tools that can be applied to a wide array of social science research issues.
2. Instil a balanced view of opportunities, problems and prospects in social science research methods on the Internet and related technologies;
3. Appreciate the ethical, legal and social issues related to digital social research and more generally, the use of social research methods to study ICTs and their social implications.
4. Bring experts into the class to introduce particular methods, while using core instructors and discussion to ensure an integration of material across the course offerings.

Teaching Arrangements

The course is team taught during Michaelmas term. There is one, two hour, session each week. The normal format of the sessions will begin with a lecture, followed by student discussion or group work. All students are expected to attend all of these sessions, whether or not they anticipate the use of a particular approach to research. In addition, there will be optional sessions to address questions and help students to develop their practical research skills. More details about these workshops will be provided at the beginning of term.

Note: Over the course of the year, small changes may be made to the content, dates or teaching arrangements set out in this reading list, at the course provider's discretion. These changes will be communicated to students directly and will be noted on the internal course information website.

Assessment

A summary of the structure and assessment of Social Research Methods and the Internet is below. Full details of each element are provided in the relevant outline.
Course providers assess the students on the basis of one summative assignment and one formative assignment during Michaelmas term. (Note that the assessment for this course is different for DPhil students. DPhil students should please refer to the Graduate Studies Handbook for guidance).

They are as follows:

**Summative Assignment for Michaelmas Term**

One 2,500-3,000 word piece of written coursework, where students critically examine a methodological issue or relate methods to a substantive topic, selecting one question from a choice of four. This allows students to explore the applicability of different methods and gives them a chance to consider methods that they might apply in their thesis. This essay will be worth 25% of the final mark for Social Research Methods and the Internet. The essay is due Friday week 8 of Michaelmas term.

**Formative Assignments**

Students will be asked to complete three formative assignments during the course of Michaelmas term to assist them in the development of their research and writing skills. Specific details of these assignments (and the submission process) will be provided in week 1 of Michaelmas term. They will involve hands on experience in the conduct of research – a foot in the door to greater involvement, and summarized in an overview of the assignment in three papers, each no more than 1000 words.

**Submission of Summative Assignment**

All coursework should be submitted in person to the Examinations School by the stated deadline. All coursework should be put in an envelope and must be addressed to ‘The Chairman of Examiners for the MSc in Social Science of the Internet C/o The Clerk of Examination Schools, High Street. Students should also ensure they add the OII coversheet at the top of the coursework. Please note that all coursework will be marked anonymously and therefore only your candidate number is required on the coversheet.

Please note that work submitted after the deadline will be processed in the standard manner and, in addition, the late submission will be reported to the Proctors' Office. If a student is concerned that they will not meet the deadline they must contact their college office or examinations school for advice. For further information on submission of assessments to the examinations school please refer to [http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/schools/oxonly/submissions/index.shtml](http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/schools/oxonly/submissions/index.shtml). For details on the regulations for late and non-submissions please refer to the Proctors website at [http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/proctors/info/pam/section9.shtml](http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/proctors/info/pam/section9.shtml).

Any student failing this assessment will need to follow the rules set out in the OII Examining Conventions regarding re-submitting failed work.

Please note that the assessment for this course is different for DPhil students. (DPhil students should please refer to the Graduate Studies Handbook for guidance).
Key Readings

A reading list is given below for each class. Those items marked with an asterisk (*) are essential reading and MUST be read by all students in preparation for the class. Items that are not marked with an asterisk are additional supplementary readings. There are four key texts used throughout the course. They are:

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The two general social research methods texts (Bryman 2008; Robson 2011) have much overlap and cover topics beyond those specifically discussed in course sessions. We recommend that you use these texts to fill in topics not covered in class, and gaps in your previous training, but which can be of value to this course, such as in preparing your research paper.

TOPICS

1. Introduction: Multi-method, Digital Social Research, and Big Data (14 October)
2. Asking Questions in the Social Sciences: Interviews and Focus Groups (21 October)
3. Developing a Research Question (28 October)
4. Formulating Research Designs (4 November)
5. Sampling and Populations (11 November)
6. Ethics of Internet Research (18 November)
7. Survey Research: Comparing On and Offline Survey Methods (25 November)
8. Case Studies (2 December)

Week 1: Multiple Methods, Digital Social Research, and Big Data: An Introduction

Tutor: Professor Bill Dutton and Dr Eric Meyer

Most mainstream approaches to social research can be used in the study of new information and communication technologies (ICTs). However, the study of ICTs often presents a number of challenges. For example, policy-makers and practitioners are often interested in the future impact of an emerging technology, rather than descriptions of yesterday’s uses and impacts. In order to
influence policy in a timely way, we require an understanding of the potential implications of developments long before they are in place. How can we develop empirical research to better inform discussions of the future of technology and its social implications? In addition, the Internet and related technologies are changing the ways in which we approach research, and raising new methodological issues. What are some of the key issues that are raised by digital social research?

This first session of the seminar will outline 1) the subject matter of the course; 2) introduce examples of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed method research; and 3) discuss the challenges of studying emerging technologies, and conducting digital social research, providing an overview of new problems and opportunities.


* Fielding, Nigel Lee, Raymond N. Blank, Grant The Sage Handbook of Online Research Methods. 2008. London: Sage, Chapter 1: The Internet as a Research Medium


Week 2: Asking Questions in the Social Sciences: Interviews and Focus Groups
Tutors: Professor Bill Dutton and Dr Grant Blank

The more immediate introduction to field research in the social sciences is to begin asking questions from a social scientific perspective. It is a core strategy of social researchers on and offline and in qualitative and quantitative methods in the social sciences. This session explores the issues of carrying out qualitative interviews in face-to-face and online contexts. It enables students to gain a familiarity with important concepts such as reflexivity, interviewer effects and different kinds of interviews, including structured and unstructured approaches and interviewing experts. Differences between structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews and focus groups will be discussed as well as their analysis.

* Ackland, R. Web Social Science, pp. 31-34.


* Colin Robson Real World Research, Chapter 11: Interviews and Focus Groups, pp. 278-301.

**Week 3: Developing a Research Question**

Tutor: Professor Bill Dutton

Framing your research question is one of the most important stages of the development of your research. Unfortunately, it is also one of the most difficult steps in the research process. While the research process is often iterative, the question should guide other choices about methods. We will discuss different types of research questions and how well your own research interests can be framed by a strong and ‘interesting’ set of research questions.

* Robson, Colin  

* Davis, Murray S.  

Elliot, M. et al  

Andrews, Richard  

**Week 4: Formulating Research Designs**

Tutors: Dr Grant Blank and Professor Bill Dutton

This session will provide an introduction to the most common research designs used in the Social Sciences; and explore issues of validity and reliability in research.

* Robson, Colin  

Barton, Alan H.  

de Vaus, David A.  

Babbie, Earl  
Week 5: Sampling: Quantitative and Qualitative Strategies

Tutors: Grant Blank with Bill Dutton

This session will provide an introduction to sampling strategies for both quantitative and qualitative research. The virtues of random sampling will be emphasized, and explained, as will turns toward big data efforts to capture entire populations.

* Babbie, Earl


* Bond, R. M., et al


* Bryman, Alan


Week 6: Ethics of Internet Research

Tutors: Ralph Schroeder with Eric Meyer

This session will consider some of the main ethical issues that researchers are likely to encounter in Internet-related research. These issues have been discussed now for some time and some guidelines for researchers have been established (Ess and the AoIR ethics working group 2002), and ESRC’s Framework for Research Ethics: http://www.esrc.ac.uk/about-esrc/information/research-ethics.aspx. Yet there is still considerable debate about the ethics of Internet research – not least because the Internet and digital social research methods are continuing to evolve rapidly. In this session we will discuss some of the major issues that have been debated - as well as some that have only recently come to the fore - and discuss how to go about addressing them. This session will also provide an overview of the CUREC procedures that need to be followed prior to carrying out the dissertation.

* Rebecca Eynon, Jenny Fry, and Ralph Schroeder


* Colin Robson


* Elizabeth Buchanan


* Alan Bryman

**Week 7: Survey Research: Comparing On and Offline Survey Methods**

Tutors: Bernie Hogan with Jonathan Bright

Survey research is one of the most prevalent quantitative techniques used in the social sciences. This session will discuss the steps that need to be taken to construct and conduct high quality academic survey research both on and offline. Specific attention will be paid to pitfalls in relation to sampling, questionnaire design and item construction. Links are made between this methodology course and the statistics course that runs in parallel to understand the implications of questionnaire design and on the possibilities of statistical analysis. The Oxford Internet Surveys and the Me, My Spouse and the Internet Surveys are used as examples throughout the session.

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<tr>
<th>Ackland, Rob</th>
<th>Web Social Science, pp. 25-31.</th>
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<tr>
<td>* Dillman, Don A.</td>
<td>Mail and Internet Surveys: the tailored design method (2nd edition). New York: Wiley, Chapter 11: <em>Internet and Interactive Voice Response Surveys</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>* Colin Robson</td>
<td>Real World Research, Chapter 10: Surveys and Questionnaires, pp. 235-277.</td>
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Week 8. Case Studies

Tutor: Bill Dutton

Researchers in communication, information and the social sciences can use case studies to serve a wide variety of purposes, such as exploring a topic, describing a technology or process, or discovering an explanation for a social phenomenon. While many students are taught the danger of generalizing from a single case, few know how to use a case, or comparative case studies, to full advantage. This session illustrates the potential of a case approach for Internet studies. The course will approach these and related issues by describing the steps of case study research and enabling students to follow these stages in the context of a ‘mini-case’ study.


