

# METHODS BRIEFING 16

## Exploring Online Research Methods in a Virtual Training Environment

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A series of methods briefings from projects funded by ESRC as part of the Research Methods Programme.

The Programme aims to develop qualitative and quantitative methods within the context of substantive research. It also aims to encourage effective dissemination of good practice.



### Background

Online research methods (ORMs) are computer mediated methodological approaches to data collection which are facilitated in a 'virtual' environment. In simpler terms, online research methods are (usually) traditional methods of data collection adapted to use online. Methods range from questionnaire surveys to participant observation and have been adapted for online use through tools such as email, websites and various software packages. ORMs provide great methodological potential and versatility for research in all fields of social science.

These methods mitigate the distance of space, enable research to be easily internationalised and allow researchers to contact groups or individuals who may otherwise be difficult to reach, such as the less physically mobile. The growth and impact of the internet in recent years

has meant that the use of online research methods is an increasingly alluring option for social scientists. However, there is little practical or theoretical guidance available and, therefore, training in online methods is a widely recognised area of need. The aim of this project was to enhance understanding of online research methods through the production and evaluation of a training package targeted at the social science community. The self-supporting online training package covers theoretical, practical and technical aspects of online research methods including web-based questionnaires, virtual synchronous and asynchronous interviews. It also draws on successful good practice case studies, covers associated ethical issues and provides important resource links.

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## Aims

'Exploring ORMs in a Virtual Training Environment' is available at [www.geog.le.ac.uk/orm](http://www.geog.le.ac.uk/orm).

The package provides:

- a high-quality online portal to training in online research methods;
- a self-supporting online resource to enhance understanding of both the theoretical and practical aspects of online research methods including online questionnaires, and virtual synchronous and asynchronous interviews;
- access to a wide range of successful good practice case studies;
- discussion of the ethical issues of online research;
- important resource links; and
- comprehensive technical guidance.

Throughout, the package emphasises the team's belief that there is a need for online researchers to tread with caution and practice their 'craft' with reflexivity. We strongly believe that online research is not going to replace onsite research but rather it is another option in the researcher's methodological 'toolkit'. Therefore the use of ORMs must be carefully considered and their long-term success will ultimately depend on the quality and credibility of the information that they generate.

## Content

The training package is structured into four main sections:

### *Introduction*

The **introduction** provides a general background to ORMs and introduces the site.

### *Modules*

The modules section is the main training area of the package. It contains the following sections:

- Online questionnaires
- Online interviews
- Online research ethics
- Technical guide: Online questionnaires



Within each of these modules a series of interdisciplinary case studies, taken from research projects which have used online methods, are used to illustrate the methods 'in action'.

Each module contains reading materials and learning activities designed to allow users to follow the training package as a course, or to locate and work on specific areas independently of the whole.

The following content is common to each module:

- Aims and learning outcomes
- FAQs
- Glossary
- Print version,
- References and further resources

### *Resources*

The **resources** section serves as a portal for information on Online Research Methods. It contains the following:

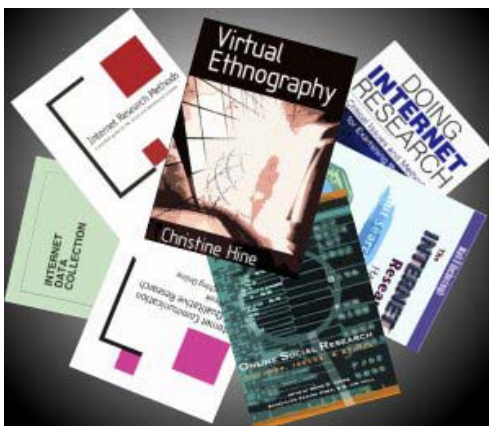
1. Key texts in the field of online research
2. Key journals in the field of online research
3. Bibliography
4. Glossary
5. Links
6. FAQs
7. Quotations

### *Project background*

The **Project Background** section offers a range of general information about the project and also captures the social production of the training package through the reflections of the project team throughout the development process, one aim being to share the lessons learnt with similar projects.

### **Target users**

The package is targeted at a wide audience including researchers and postgraduates in the HE sector, and researchers working for other organisations, such as those involved with public policy and market research. It has therefore been designed with the different requirements of these users in mind. For example, it is possible to either ‘dip in and out’ of the package or to work through the modules systematically. Each module includes a built in series of learning activities through which users can test their knowledge and understanding, but these do not have to be completed in order to move forward. For academic users, one useful feature is the



‘personal references list’ facility which allows users to collect a ‘shopping basket’ of references as they navigate the package. These can subsequently be printed or downloading as text or endNote ready XML.

Although the training package is designed for self-study use online, a range of face-to-face and online training and dissemination activities have been conducted to ensure that the training package will enhance current training programmes for the research community and contribute to the body of research in online methods and online learning. Forthcoming training events are detailed on the project website.



### **Key publications**

Madge, C. and O’Connor, H. (2002) Online with e-mums: Exploring the Internet as a medium for research, *Area*, 34, 1, 92-102.

O’Connor, H. and Madge, C. (2001) Cyber-mothers: Online synchronous interviewing using conferencing software. *Sociological Research Online*, 5, 4.

[www.socresonline.org.uk/5/4/o’connor.html](http://www.socresonline.org.uk/5/4/o’connor.html)



## **Training Researchers in Online Research Methods (TRI-ORM)**

The work of the project 'Exploring Online Methods in a Virtual Training Environment' will be built on in the future through a new project funded by the ESRC's Researcher Development Initiative (RDI). This project, TRI-ORM (Training Researchers in Online Research Methods), will develop a comprehensive three-stranded training programme in online research methods catering for the needs of both novice and more experienced online social science researchers. Online research methods (ORM) represent cutting edge methodological developments in the social sciences but as yet there is no coherent training or professional development provision in these methods available for UK social scientists. TRI-ORM will fill this clearly identified gap in research training and will achieve widespread training in ORM. To achieve this aim a flexible training programme has been developed to cater for varying levels of knowledge, varying stages of career development and different modes of learning.

The training programme will include three strands (hence TRI-ORM):

- a) six face-to-face, one-day introductory workshops based in ESRC Regional Training Centres;
- b) 10-week online training module for advanced users;
- c) self-directed study through the already established website and further enhancement of this resource.

TRI-ORM will start in May 2007.

The project is run by Clare Madge, Jane Wellens, Tristram Hooley, Rob Shaw and Julia Meek,  
University of Leicester.

To find out more about the workshops and to get an update on the training modules, go to:

<http://www.geog.le.ac.uk/ORM/>

Further details are available from:  
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