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Keywords: online, qualitative, research, communities, focus groups, blogging, social media, mobile

This article focuses on online qualitative techniques

Online focus groups typically comprise 6–8 people, participating in an hour long discussion

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Online research: Methods, benefits and issues — Part 2

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Abstract

This paper is an update of the one written in 2002, when online surveys had made a significant impact on research in the USA, but were yet to take hold in Europe and elsewhere. Part 1 of this paper, published last month, described the significant growth and impact of quantitative online research since 2002. This second part focuses on qualitative and hybrid online research techniques, describing the drivers and barriers for the adoption of methods including online focus groups and online communities.

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Introduction

In 2002, the lead author wrote an article for this publication titled ‘Online survey techniques: current issues and future trends’. Nearly a decade later, he looks back at how the market has changed and provides an update of the current and emerging online research methods.

The first part (published last issue) looked at online quantitative techniques that have now come to dominate the market research industry worldwide. In this second and concluding part, we’ll look at online qualitative techniques and hybrid ones (mainly involving social media) that are now at last beginning to make serious inroads into the market. It will also look at some techniques that will affect the industry over the next decade.

Qualitative online research

Introduction

Back in 2002, the lead author noted that online qualitative research was rarely being used, particularly in Europe. Since then, there has been a growth in usage mainly on the back of improved software. However, unlike quantitative research, the vast majority of qualitative research is conducted off-line. Some of the issues inhibiting online growth are discussed later in this section.

The main techniques used to collect qualitative data online are described in Table 1.

Online focus groups

Definition

Online focus groups are often regarded as a digital version of off-line face-to-face focus groups. Typically, online groups comprise c.6–8

Table 1: Online qualitative research techniques

Technique	Description
Online focus groups	An online chat session, where typically around six–eight participants interact in a moderated online environment
<i>Ad hoc</i> online market research communities	A short-term online community (or bulletin board group), lasting around 1–3 weeks, with around 25–100 consumers participating (often daily) in research tasks — discussions, polls, etc
Online journals	An online task (typically diary or mystery shopping based), lasting around 1–3 weeks, moderated by a researcher who sets tasks and ask questions of the participants throughout the exercise. Often with a small number of participants, that is 5–15

people, participating in a discussion via a dedicated online chat space, moderated by a researcher.

Software

Such groups can be conducted in theory using any online chat software. However, in the last ten years, companies such as NQual and Artefact have developed software specifically designed to facilitate online focus groups. This software includes features such as modes (participant, moderator, observer), multimedia display and commenting, participant handling (eg talk privately with one group members) and analysis options (eg different data export functions).

What is different to off-line groups?

There are a number of characteristics that distinguish online groups from their off-line equivalent. These include:

- Multiple participation, with a number of people able to interact at the same time. However, the downside of this is that the feel of an online focus group is often more chaotic than an off-line group (where participants will speak one at a time, following a linear flow).
- Two moderators. Given the text-based nature of online focus groups, it is likely that two moderators will work during a session — one to interact and moderate the group and the other to read the comments and interact with the client.
- Fewer respondents. It is generally acknowledged that fewer respondents make online groups more manageable.¹

Online focus groups can benefit from increased openness, geographical scope and unbiased responses

Benefits

Online focus groups can offer a number of distinct benefits, over and above face-to-face groups:

- Openness — because participants are interacting anonymously, they are less likely to feel inhibited in what they say. In the same way, it

Table 2: Online focus group case study

Client/ agency	Major retailer/Join the Dots (formerly known as Virtual Surveys)
Objective	Understand preparations for Christmas grocery shopping to specifically understand the reasons for shopping online or offline
Method	Two <i>ad hoc</i> online focus groups were conducted on 22 December (evening), each lasting 1-¼ hours. Group comprised seven online shoppers, Group 2 seven offline shoppers
Outcome	<p>The research allowed the retailer to understand the benefits and barriers to online grocery shopping immediately before Christmas. It enabled them to improve their online offer in terms of availability, stock levels and building trust/reassurance with customers</p> <p>The technique had a number of benefits including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Enabling people to take part in a group from home meant the research could be conducted just before Christmas (when snow was causing travel disruption)• Quick research turnaround — the results were delivered just after Christmas• Low incentive — in comparison with other qualitative methodologies — of just £10 per person

is unlikely that online focus groups will be hijacked by a dominant member (which can happen off-line).

- Increased geographical scope — the method allows researchers to speak to people anywhere in the world.
- Representivity — given that online groups can reach people anywhere, it can be easier to recruit hard-to-find audiences, or participants who would not be willing to travel to a focus group in a central location.
- Unbiased response — given that members of an online focus group can all ‘talk’ at once, it is less likely that members will be influenced by what other participants say.
- Cost — they can be cheaper, but sometimes not significantly so (see next section).
- Speed — if participants can be easily recruited via email, then it is likely that recruitment and implementation will be faster. The project described in Table 2 benefited from fast project turnaround.

Online focus groups can suffer from lack of non verbal communication and the ability to explain and discuss complex issues

Issues

As mentioned previously, growth in qualitative online solutions has been less meteoric than online surveys and communities. This can be attributed to a number of factors, including:

- Lack of non-verbal communication, which can form a key part of many moderators’ analysis and understanding from conventional groups. Online groups/communities are more appropriate for describing factual and reasoned thoughts, whereas off-line groups more clearly allow understanding of a person’s feelings and how they react to stimuli in their own context.

- Difficulty in explaining and discussing complex issues. Face-to-face groups allow a moderator to explain an issue or concept at some length and for participants to ask questions in order to understand. However, the ability to do this in an online focus group is more limited. Indeed, the authors company has found that online qualitative techniques can be good for breadth of insight, but can sometimes lack depth.
- Online focus groups have sometimes not offered the cost savings that people might expect. Travel costs will be higher for an off-line project, but actual exec hours spent on managing, analysing and presenting will be similar, especially factoring in double moderation and hire of specialist software.
- It is also apparent that few, if any, leading qualitative thinkers have fully embraced online qualitative techniques or taken the lead in their development.

Ad hoc online communities typically comprise 25–100 consumers, participating in discussions and other tasks across a 1–2 week period

Ad hoc online market research communities

Definition

Ad hoc online market research communities typically comprise around 25–100 consumers taking part in daily research tasks — discussions, polls, etc — across one to two weeks. Usually, there will be a cash incentive for response. The communities are nearly always qualitative in nature, whereas larger scale ongoing communities — often called Market Research Online Communities (MROCs) — will sometimes have a degree of quantitative functionality/research in the form of surveys. (See the ‘Hybrid Quant/Qual Research’ section below for more on MROCs.)

Community members can be recruited from customer email lists (or sometimes telephone), but also via online access panels or even face to face.

Key tools

Discussion is at the heart of most *ad hoc* online communities. These will be supplemented by other tools and techniques such as polls, sticky notes boards, mood boards, blogs, etc.

Ad hoc online communities can offer larger, geographically dispersed samples and an iterative research approach

Benefits

There are a variety of key benefits, when compared with more traditional qualitative research, such as face-to-face focus groups, including:

- larger samples for less cost;
- iterative and longitudinal — the nature and/or direction of the discussion can be changed, depending on what is being said by participants;
- increased geographic scope;
- increased participant openness and engagement.

Table 3: *Ad hoc* online market research community case study

Client/agency	NUS Services/Join the Dots (formerly known as Virtual Surveys)
Objectives	NUS Services is owned by Students' Unions and the National Union of Students (NUS), a confederation of unions representing around 95 per cent of all students in further and higher education in the UK. NUS Services wanted to redevelop the NUS website (http://www.nus.org.uk/) from scratch, with students at the heart of the re-design and re-launch process
Method	An <i>ad hoc</i> online market research community was conducted, with students — a mix of six formers, undergrads and postgrads across the UK — recruited by NUS Services. The community lasted two weeks, with community members invited to participate in daily discussions and occasional polls. In total, 57 students from across the UK contributed
Outcome	The research allowed NUS Services to understand what students used the internet for and what role an NUS website had to play. More specifically, it allowed the NUS to develop a website that was a vast improvement to the old in terms of content (including social media elements), look/feel (incorporating a colour palette and images for the first time) and navigation

An example of an *ad hoc* online community is described in Table 3.

Issues

However, as discussed in 2002, online qualitative techniques do have some limitations to face-to-face interaction, *ad hoc* online market research communities, there needs to be an understanding that they can suffer from a lack of non-verbal cues, as well as the inability to tackle more complex or emotional topics.

Thus, when thinking about conducting *ad hoc* communities, it is important to understand the objectives and the specific issues that need exploring. If they are complex, and non-verbal reaction will be important to the analysis, then a face-to-face approach might be more suitable.

Online journals

Definition

Online journals describe an online task — typically diary or mystery shopping based — lasting around 1–3 weeks, moderated by a researcher. As the process is quite intensive from a moderation perspective, the number of participants usually ranges from 10 to 20. Participants keep a digital diary that can be private to them (and the moderator) or viewed by other bloggers participating in the research study (depending on the nature of the project).

Participants can be recruited from customer email lists (or sometimes telephone), but also via online access panels or even face to face.

Software

Most research journal exercises take place using dedicated software, developed by research providers for their own use, or provided by

Online journals typically comprise 10–20 consumers blogging across a 1–3 week period

Dedicated software allows research participants to express themselves in text, video and pictures, via a variety of devices

Online journals benefit from real time feedback, cost efficiencies, geographic scope and multimedia outputs

Interesting tasks, engaged moderation and incentives all help to drive engagement

Ongoing online communities typically comprise of consumers participating in research tasks across 12 or more months

research software companies such NQual. Key to the software is the ability for participants to blog in a number of mediums — text, video, pictures — using a variety of devices, for example PC, mobile phone, digital camera. The key is to make it as easy as possible for someone to provide a thought, feeling or emotion at any time, in any way.

Benefits

There are a variety of benefits to online journals:

- ‘In the moment’ participation — the technology used allows participants to blog almost whenever and wherever they are, allowing them to log diary entries during, or just after, an experience. This allows for more immediate and reliable responses, that are less reliable on memory.
- Cost efficient — there is no need for the researcher to be physically present with the participant, saving on travel and exec time costs.
- Geographic scope — participants can blog from anywhere in the world.
- Multimedia — build a rich picture of the consumer through words, images, videos, etc. This is fun for the respondent and powerful for both the researcher and client.

Issues

Online diaries have similar issues to online focus groups and communities. They do not offer much in the way of non-verbal cues (although allowing for video blogging can start to mitigate for this). In addition, the participant is working in physical isolation from the researcher, who is reliant on them being engaged and committed to blogging on an ongoing basis over a number of days. Interesting tasks, engaged moderation and incentives all help to drive engagement.

Hybrid quant/qual online research

Ongoing online market research communities

Definition

As the growth in online access panels in the last ten years has radically changed the landscape of the market research industry, it is likely that growth of MROCs, as they are often called, is introducing another seismic shift in the way market research is conducted.

Ongoing online market research communities can be defined as a closed pool of registered people who have agreed to participate in research including discussions, polls and surveys. Generally, in addition to personal details, various socio-demographic and other characteristics of potential research participants are saved. Depending on the aim of the research, specific target groups are selected from the pool of community participants, using different selection methods. Participants are then invited (mostly by email, but sometimes by phone) to take

part in the research. Participants will often interact with fellow community members, as well as researchers and/or the end client.

Communities can be seen as an evolution of the in-house/client panel, as well as being complementary or a replacement in some cases. Whereas panels are characterised mainly by individual responses, provided in isolation via online surveys, communities are characterised by interactive responses — between participant/researcher/client — via qualitative and quantitative research techniques, including:

- Qualitative discussions, which can feature digital tools such as ...
 - Sticky notes boards
 - Mood boards
- Quantitative surveys and polls
- Semi-structured interviews
- Qualitative live chats
- Qualitative journals/diaries/blogs

Ongoing online communities will generally last at least three months and probably 12 months and longer.

Ongoing communities can address multiple research issues

What types of research are communities best suited to?

Communities are great for new product or service development work, existing brand and product feedback (including of competing brands), marketing communications development, market understanding (usage, attitudes, needs) and longitudinal research.

Key players

As with online panels, the USA has led the way in the adoption of online market research communities. In particular, Communispace has been the market leader and currently runs communities for around 200 clients. Other early adopters in this space included Vision Critical (Canadian) and Join the Dots (formerly known as Virtual Surveys, UK).

Growth has been driven by a desire to engage participants in a more adult and equal partnership

Drivers of growth

There are a number of factors that explain the adoption and ongoing growth in communities:

1. A more equal partnership. From a psychological perspective, communities move the research process from being a Parent-to-Child relationship to an Adult-to-Adult relationship. Typically, surveys pose questions from the research agency or client (Adult) to respondents (Child). The answers are chosen in the form of pre-coded lists and we ask the respondent to answer them on their own, with no interaction with the agency, end client or any other respondent. When finished, the respondent will rarely hear what happened as a result of them completing the survey. In a community, the environment is far more Adult to Adult and interactive and collaborative in nature. There is still a research agenda and the agency/client will pose questions that they

The adoption of online research communities reflects the growth in social media

Online communities offer qualitative understanding

Online communities can provide significant ROI

expect/hope participants (not respondents!) will answer. However, the questions are not answered in isolation. Participants get to see and comment on answers from other participants. Agency moderators probe participants to expand on detail. The participants can also ask questions of the client/agency or start their own topics of conversation for the group.

2. The rise of social media. Online market research communities mirror wider social developments, particularly the growth and pervasiveness of social media such as social networks, forums and blogs. In what Universal McCann calls 'the democratisation of influence',² consumers now seek the opinions of fellow consumers online. Plus, they freely share their opinions online and expect brands to be more open to listening to customers. MROCs are a vehicle that can be created by brands to allow them to seed topics that kick-start consumer conversations that they can then listen to and join in with. ('Listening' is currently one of the big buzzwords in research.)
3. A shift away from quantitative measurement towards qualitative exploration. A quote from Stan Sthanunathan, insight boss at Coca-Cola sums up this shift very well:

People are too focused on probability and non-probability samples. (and) on the technicalities of research, whereas the expectation from clients is actually in a totally different space ... There's a huge amount of insight that's below the water and we're not necessarily best-in-class in terms of understanding insight about those things that are below the water line. It's about understanding the human condition ...

Online communities have a very strong qualitative element to them. If they comprise of around 1,000 members or more then surveys are feasible, but qualitative discourse is likely to be at the heart of most online communities.

4. Faster and cheaper research. Create a community and a brand that has a pool of people ready and willing to take part in research on a regular and ongoing basis. Apart from the set-up costs and ongoing management fees, there are no fees for individual projects. Given this, many clients have reported impressive ROI statistics from their communities. In addition, each individual community project requires minimal set-up, with results turned round very quickly.
5. Switch away from access panels. As noted in the previous section, the effects of peak panel are beginning to be felt and this is another factor that is causing more organisations to start considering alternatives such as MROCs.

Issues

The main issue facing ongoing online communities is that of engagement, particularly sustained engagement. In an ideal world, all those who agree to join a community will participate in each and every research task, for as long as the community runs. However, the reality is very different. The authors company has found that of those who sign up to a community, only around 50 per cent will ever participate.

Member engagement is key to success – a sense that consumers are being listened to will help

(Although this might seem low, this is much higher than natural online communities where participation is normally just 1–10 per cent of users.)

Even among those who do participate in a community, only a very small proportion will complete *every* research task they are invited to. So, what can be done to increase engagement levels?

- A sense that the members are being listened to and their opinions matter, that is engaged moderation.
- A sense that the client is acting on the feedback they receive from members and thus the feedback will improve the service customers receive.
- Interesting content and sense they have access to information that others do not have.
- The opportunity to win prizes in return for their participation (although this is much less important to most than one might imagine).

In addition, a clear understanding of why members have joined up to a community can aid its design and management. The authors' company has worked with Salford University to understand member motivations to joining and participate.³ There appear to be two key reasons (which are not mutually exclusive):

- Information: many will join in order to be told new and exclusive things about the brand, that is, see a new ad before launch, hear about a new promotion. This gives them something to talk about and potentially benefit from (in the case of promotions).
- Power: some members will join as they want to be part of a brand's development, for example have a say in new products, services or communications.

By understanding motivations, the community can be managed to satisfy member needs and thus hopefully increase sustained engagement.

Another issue that has become more prominent as communities have become more established is the ability of the client and agency to balance the need for both tactical and strategic research questions to be answered by the community. There can be a danger for communities to be used as a sort of qualitative omnibus, providing quick and cheap answers to very tactical questions. In the meantime, their ability to help with strategic issues can be overlooked and/or pushed aside. A number of ways to avoid this are to:

- set clear objectives at the start of the project;
- conduct regular stakeholder review meetings to understand how the community is performing in terms of insight delivery and what can be done to improve it;
- ensure that a certain proportion of community tasks are clearly ring-fenced for strategic issues.

An example of an ongoing online community is described in Table 4.

It is important to plan and manage the community so it provides strategic insight as well as tactical

Table 4: Ongoing online market research community case study

Client/ agency	O2/Join the Dots (formerly known as Virtual Surveys)
Objectives	O2 wanted to develop an ‘always on’ research resource that allowed them to get closer to customers and answer multiple research objectives on an ongoing basis
Method	‘Join In’ was created, a long-term online market research community, that allows O2 to talk with customers about a range of research issues, including advertising development and testing, new product/service development, understanding consumer lifestyles, customer experience and service delivery, website research, etc. A new research task is served to members at least weekly, using a variety of tools such as discussions, live chats, journals and heat maps
Outcome	<p>The community offers O2 a number of benefits:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customer closeness — O2 keeps its finger on the pulse • Speed — provides quick and timely feedback • Longitudinal — explore strategic issues over time • Inclusivity — the community is used by stakeholders from across the business • Integrated — a research tool that combines with other techniques, such as customer satisfaction tracking and CRM • Cost — an economical way of doing more research (than prior to having the community)

Buzz research

Introduction

Buzz research is the analysis of what people talk about online

Buzz research, also referred to as social media monitoring or mining, is the analysis of what people talk about online. It is different from most other forms of market research, insofar as it does not involve asking questions of people. Instead, buzz research is focused on ‘listening’ to what people are saying and learning from those online conversations.

In the ongoing online market research communities section above, the authors cite ‘democratisation of influence’ as a key factor in allowing for the development of research communities. This impact — where peoples’ perceptions of brands and issues are more and more influenced by fellow citizens — stems from the rise of social media technology on the internet, in the form of discussion forums, blogs, social media networks (eg Facebook, Twitter), review/ecommerce sites (eg Amazon) and news commentary sites (eg BBC ‘Have Your Say’). Many people are sharing, reading and trusting opinions with both friends and strangers. Topics that frequently generate most buzz include films, music, technology, books and holiday, but it is true that people will talk about almost anything online. This large mass of online discussion and opinion is a rich source of insight into peoples’ behaviour, attitudes and needs.

How buzz research can be conducted

A basic four-step framework for conducting buzz research is as follows:

There are four key phases of buzz research: scoping, discovery, coding and analysis

1. Scoping. Define the scope of the project — what are the objectives, what discussion is relevant and where can it be found online?

2. Discovery. Automated and human searches help identify potentially useful discussion online.
3. Code. The discussion is classified in terms of topic (what is someone talking about?) and sentiment (are they talking in a positive, neutral or negative way?). For example, if a mobile phone manufacturer is looking to understand reactions to a newly launched handset, topics of conversation under which buzz and sentiment would be coded could include handset size, battery life, software, usability, specific functions (eg camera), etc.
4. Analyse. The coding is analysed to provide:
 - A quantitative overview of discussion, for example 34 per cent of discussion is about the camera, 78 per cent of it negative
 - A qualitative understanding of what is driving the quantitative numbers, for example what is it about the camera that is driving negative discussion? Is it picture resolution, flash capability, video capability etc? What can be done to improve things?

The analysis possibilities described above are the reason for classifying buzz research as a hybrid technique. It offers quantitative robustness, plus qualitative depth.

There are a number of automated services that can be used to monitor buzz. Some of the most frequently used currently include Alterian, Biz360, Brandwatch, Buzzmetrics, Radian6, Scoutlabs and Sysomos. There are also free or near-free offerings with more limited functionality that can be found by Googling 'social media monitoring'. However, it is important to note that there is a fundamental difference between buzz *monitoring*, which is generally automated and highlights mentions of products/services/brands, and buzz *research*, which goes one step further and analyses what the mentions actually mean for the client, for example why does someone not like a product, what element of a new service has got customers excited?

Uses

The main types of projects that buzz research can be used for are:

- product and service development;
- advertising and marketing communications tracking;
- brand/market mapping (usage and attitudes);
- identifying future trends/needs;
- customer satisfaction tracking.

Benefits

The benefits of buzz research include:

- unique quantitative/qualitative feedback;
- unfiltered/unbiased feedback, in the customers' language;
- fast feedback, that is as soon as a product/service is launched;
- opinions about niche products;

Be aware of the difference between buzz monitoring and buzz research

Buzz research can provide fast and unbiased insight

- cost — no need to find people and ask questions, instead you search for discussion online;
- easy to cover different languages;
- easy to cover different competitors.

There are some important ethical and legal issues surrounding buzz research

Issues

There are two key issues that are currently being discussed among market researchers. The first centres on respondent anonymity and the ethics of analysing and quoting a person's opinion that has been posted online without their permission. This is a particular issue if verbatim quotes are included in reports, as it is often easy to find the personal details of a poster merely from pasting part of the quote back into a search engine. Not only might this cause issues with some Data Protection laws, it might also be against researchers' ethical codes that forbid passing on personal information without consent.

Second, some website owners' Terms of Use prohibit the use of content for commercial gain (including user-generated content). So, mining discussion/commentary on a website and then producing a market research report could be in breach of Terms of Use. A recent example (October 2010) of this was reported in the Wall Street Journal,⁴ where the PatientsLikeMe website issued a cease and desist letter to Nielsen Buzzmetrics (a buzz research company) to stop it using discussions taken from its site. Nielsen complied, but the PatientsLikeMe Chairman was quoted as saying 'we're a business, and the reality is that someone came in and stole from us'. This incident was a major embarrassment for Nielsen, and the MR industry has responded by creating guidelines for social media research, which are due to be published by ESOMAR in early 2011. These guidelines are likely to require researchers to consider disguising (or 'cloaking' as it is called) any comments in reports that might cause harm if the identity of the poster was revealed. They will also probably require researchers to respect (and avoid using) so-called 'walled garden' communities where people have posted comments they believe to be private to members of that community or service.

Newer developments

What are the other key trends that look likely to impact the world of online market research?

Mobile

In 2002, the lead author wrote 'eventually mobile interviewing will also become feasible as devices become more sophisticated and with better bandwidth. Currently mobile surveys are only appropriate for very short, simple surveys'.

A decade on, mobile surveys interviewing currently still remains a niche area for market research, but is at last showing some growth. Why might this be? In Ray Poynter's 2010 book 'The Handbook of Online and Social Media Research',⁵ he highlights that a method needs

competitive advantage in at least one of three criteria, namely faster, cheaper or better, and mobile interviewing hasn't managed to fully establish any of these elements. The authors agree with Poynter that it hasn't been able to topple the established methods of online and telephone research yet.

However, it is likely that we are on the cusp of a boom in mobile interviewing, for several reasons:

Research via mobile is due to boom, strongly driven by smartphone adoption

- Rapid adoption of the smartphone. Larger screen, increased usability and improved survey rendering are making mobile surveys a more feasible and viable option. Plus, multimedia in the form of pictures and videos enables researchers to consider richer, more ethnographic applications that provide a window into consumers' lives.
- The upward trend of mobile internet usage. In late 2010, 16 per cent of the world's population owned a smartphone capable of using online data. Furthermore, usage is expected to double within five years as mobile overtakes the PC as the most popular way to get on the web.
- The method hasn't been able to major on the benefit of immediate response and location-based work up until now, but this is becoming increasingly important to businesses and they are beginning to realize the opportunities to capture elements such as real-time interaction with advertising, plus product/service experience.

Despite this, one of the main challenges still remains the small size of the screen. This means that researchers need to rethink their questions for this mode, that is make them shorter and simpler and also cut down the number (maximum six ideally).

In addition to surveys, researchers are starting to use mobile devices for other projects — particularly ethnography. A number of Apps have been developed to facilitate this, for example EDLapp, EthOS.

DIY research solutions have grown in number and popularity

Free (or nearly free) research

Changes to the web have led to a shift towards zero price models for some services. Chris Anderson of Wired magazine argues in his book 'Free: The Future of a Radical Price'⁶ that 'as products go digital, their marginal cost goes to zero'.

This development is leading to some seismic changes in the research industry. In particular, a significant divergence seems to be appearing between DIY and added value offerings. In online survey software terms, the emergence of free or low-cost online software providers, such as Survey Monkey, Zoomerang and Survey Gizmo, is having a major impact, especially when married with an increase in customer email lists and cheaper panel costs. In combination, these elements are providing research buyers with new (and cheaper) options for conducting research.

In 2002, the author highlighted how companies such as InsightExpress had been launched off the back of large online panels. The model was simple — research buyers type in their questions,

select their sample, pay with a credit card (the cost in 2002 was around \$1,000) and get results emailed to them the next day.

At present, there are a variety of even cheaper solutions such as askyourtargetmarket.com, which markets itself as offering ‘Serious Market Research at silly prices’. The site lets buyers define a target market demographic and then write a survey to distribute to a group of around 50 respondents on their consumer panel. All for less than \$30 or £19.

Automated research

A few companies have been working on trying to automate the interviewing process online. Brainjuicer, for example, has created robotic researchers programmed to represent a particular type of person, conducting automated mass web ethnography to build up a rich, detailed picture of their lives from which understanding, insights and new product ideas can be generated.⁷

Research of this type is still in its infancy but has some potential for certain types of work. There may be some ethical considerations with these methods. For example, it is unclear how ordinary people would feel if they realised they were interacting online with such automated objects.

Synthesized research

Another of the recent buzzwords in the industry in 2011 is ‘synthesis’. The idea behind this is that rather than concentrating on just using one project or method to solve a problem, researchers are more open to multi-method approaches and integrating more secondary research and social media data into their analysis.

It is still early days to see how this may evolve for the industry. The trick is going to be able to create systems that allow researchers to intelligently pull together, integrate and synthesize the data.

Concluding comments — Part 2

As has been seen in these two articles, online research has come of age over the last decade. It has been transformed into the dominant quantitative data collection method worldwide for the industry. Online qualitative techniques have been slow to take off and are likely to remain relatively niche methods over the next decade.

Instead, the main growth will be in hybrid techniques such as online communities and buzz research and also in areas such as mobile interviewing, which will finally be adopted widely by the industry.

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Communities, buzz and mobile research will experience significant growth in the coming years

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