Developing Email Interview Practices in Qualitative Research

by Edgar Burns
La Trobe University

Abstract

This article describes using email as a kind of interview. In a sociological study of professional career transition into law, on several occasions in that study, interview participants suggested using emails rather than face-to-face interviews. This 'irregularity' set off reflection whether email interviews counted as 'proper' interviews. Discussing examples of email interviews clarifies differences from other uses of email in research, and assists exploration of advantages and disadvantages of email interviews as a qualitative research method. A preliminary framework is suggested for evaluation the suitability of email interviews. Present-day limitations point to continuing development in this area of social research. Current indications are that emergent media technologies such as email interviews, like other new media innovations, do not diminish older forms, but rather enrich the array of investigatory tools available for social research today.

Keywords: Email Interview; Email Research; Interview Methodology; Mixed Method

When is an Interview Not an Interview?

1.1 I might have once said, in answer to the question 'When is an interview not an interview?' – 'When you are *not* interviewing someone'. This answer is tautological because the question appears to simply challenge the obvious. But what does count as interviewing someone? Interviewing is conventionally understood as two (at least) people talking, with one leading the conversation. However, with my thesis supervisor cagey about how many more interviews he would allow, issues of what was or was not an interview took a new twist when respondents in my research project began saying to me, 'What about doing the interview by email?' Such 'irregularity' in the carefully planned research process set off reflection whether email interviews counted as 'proper' interviews.

1.2 Further exploration of this situation has led to investigating what research literature is available about defining email interviews and using email for interviewing. Although using emails in social research is expanding as both a digital tool (method), and as a focus of attention (data, content), many research textbooks still make only very limited reference to qualitative email use. Hine (2008: 304-320) identifies the broader category of internet research, naming surveys, focus-type groups, as fieldwork in on-line settings, and analysis of online documents. This is perhaps not surprising considering her (2005) previous extensive and sympathetic exploration of ideas for social researchers learning to engage internet possibilities for their research work. Bryman's chapter (2008: 627-659), 'E-research: using the internet as object and method of data collection', is one example of much fuller engagement in developing the notion of email interviewing (2008: 642-643).

1.3 Emails as interviews can be distinguished from email usage for making contact with prospective participants and arranging face-to-face interviews, now commonplace in qualitative research; and email lists are increasingly used as the basis for survey research (Gunter et al., 2002). Emailing may be the mode of contact throughout and at the conclusion of participant involvement. However, emails and phone conversations as interviews may include consciously planning to engage in email interviews instead of, or as well as, face-to-face interviews, because of time limits or other reasons. A phone interview developed from prior email interaction occurred in one instance in the career transition study, somewhat like the journalism practice discussed below. The potential for this new interview form was also seen in the present research in frequent participant offers as we ended face-to-face interviews: 'If there's anything else you want to know, or you'd like to clarify a point, just send me an email'. As the later discussion here of Ryen's (2001) study shows, email, interview, and participant observation can be usefully combined in various

ways as a composite research methodology.

1.4 Increasing conventionality and convenience of gathering data using email fits contemporary technologically imbued daily life for a considerable proportion of the population. If Atkinson and Silverman (1997) could say over a decade ago we live in an 'interview society', it must be even more true to say today we live in an email society – billions of emails sent daily exceed the admittedly significant interview opportunities in many forms of media. As a qualitative researcher heeding my participants' suggestions, this discussion is about more fully 'getting my head around' email interviews as they become part of the regular practice of social research incorporating processes of contact, data exchange and data collection, as social inquiry continues to evolve. In section 11.1 below a preliminary framework for evaluating the suitability of email interviewing for research populations is presented in Figure 1 and discussed.

Career Transition Project Generating Email Interviews

2.1 Three email interviews from my current sociological research project on career transition into law created an 'irregularity'. These email interviews deviated from the planned program of meeting in person with interviewees at a time and place arranged between participant and researcher. Two men and one woman, all in their sixties, one from USA settled in New Zealand, one UK person settled in Australia, and one New Zealand citizen, participated in this way. All three were familiar with email communication in their work lives, as professional skills. What were the similarities and differences between these email interviews and the fifty face-to-face interviews?

2.2 These three people who preferred email exchange had differing presenting reasons for why this might be a better way to be interviewed, each saying they were more than happy to be involved and contribute to the study. These participants' suggestions parallel Bampton and Cowton's (2002) experience surveying and interviewing management lecturers about ethics teaching. However, at the stage in the career transition study when my participants' made offers of email interviews this seemed to come from 'left field', given my focus on face-to-face interviewing. None of the three current participants were in principle opposed to being interviewed, but all, separately, suggested the email alternative for their own practical reasons.

2.3 The first potential participant had been contacted by a friend of hers at the conclusion of that friend's earlier interview in the career transition project. This person responded to her friend's inquiry by emailing me and offering to do an interview. However, travel overseas for several weeks was then followed by a period of ill-health. Rather than missing participation in the project, she proposed she would answer questions by email if that would be useful.

2.4 The second participant similarly was contacted snowball style, this time through a book club friend. This person was already committed to going overseas, and would have acceded to a face-to-face interview if pressed to arrange a time and place to meet before his departure for a several-week-long trip, but given that the time was short to make such an arrangement, offered to respond using emails to a series of questions if that was a suitable alternative.

2.5 The third respondent in this cluster of email interviewees was contacted through a survey of university law students that formed part of the larger research project along with the interviews. Survey respondents, who fitted the subsequent interview profile of having transitioned to study law, were invited to write their email address in the online survey for later contact. In following up survey participants who made email addresses available, this person responded that while he was willing to spend time and be involved in an interview, he recognized that his residential location for arranging a place for an interview might significantly restrict our opportunity to meet, and so he too offered to provide answers to interview questions by email if I sent him questions by email.

2.6 The procedure used to process these email interviews for subsequent analysis was relatively simple. Email responses were copied into conventional Microsoft Word© documents that were given identity codes and names in exactly the same fashion as the other face-to-face interview transcripts. Further email exchanges were also copied into the same documents. Over several exchanges, a corpus of email text of several thousand words in a single document for each participant was established. Email interviews were treated in the same way for coding purposes as other interview transcriptions and documentary material.

Research Literature on Emails

3.1 Several kinds of research literature exist around the phenomenon and function of emails, most of which are only tangentially relevant for the present purpose of reflecting on emails as a kind of interview. Briefly demarcating these here contributes to clarity about the present use of email interviews.

3.2 First, emails as a problem to be researched. Examples here include articles and websites that examine this issue from a point of management strategies such as employee time spent on emails, risk, or security concerns. Practical organisational policies follow from such considerations (Shipley and Schwalbe, 2008). Second, email research and deployment of emails as a channel for marketing research (Curasi, 2001; Groves, 2009). Third, emails can be studied as a late-modern phenomenon, one of the epoch-changing technological innovations of the electronic era. For example, Castells' (2009: xxvi) remark, 'Email is mostly a person-to-person form of communication, even when carbon copying and mass emailing are taken into account', sits inside his exploration of contemporary networked society. Fourth, overlapping this broad category, email research may examine ways in which email is one medium in a sequential development of new modes of communication such as texting, instant messaging, Twitter©, or Google Wave©.

3.3 Fifth, commercially motivated research by corporations such as Microsoft and Google, analyses email user types, groupings, and interactions patterns, enabling customer targeting with data mining algorithms (Berry and Linoff, 2004). However, socio-theoretic debate (Savage and Burrows, 2007, 2009) about

disciplinary and societal significance of accumulations of vast amounts of digital data, including emails, has been slow to ignite.

3.4 Each of these research foci on emails has its own value and place, but did not impact on the normalised use of emails in the present study. A notable feature here, and this will be considered further under limitations of this method, is the naturalised everyday assumption of emails as a normal and reasonable way of communicating in the research setting by the participants themselves.

Out of Journalism

4.1 A sixth use this brief overview of email literatures delimiting the present reflection concerns explicit use of the term 'email interview' in journalism (Hart, 2006). In the news industry email is now well established in setting up interviews, gaining access where 'on the record' interviews are not possible, or for receiving information that otherwise would take long amounts of time to obtain. Media industry concerns that emails create 'lazy reporting', and how email communication replaces phone contact with informants and sources, need not detain us here.

4.2 Verdegaal (2003) illustrates this mainstream use of the term:

> The group's biggest challenge now is the issue of impunity for violations of women's human rights, especially during wartime. 'Increasingly, rape is systematically used as a tool of war,' Emma Lindsay of MARWOPNET said in an *email interview* with IPS. *(No page)*

'In an email interview…' now appears frequently in news reports, acknowledging the importance of attribution and source in public stories. However, this use of emails does offer some clues how email interviews work, or what is involved in qualitative investigation.

4.3 Not all issues affecting journalism affect social science investigation, or not necessarily in the same way. Nevertheless, reading journalists' description of email interviews (Hart, 2006), or email interview etiquette (Junnarkar, 2003), shows points of similarity worth studying as well as sectoral differences from social science qualitative research.

4.4 Hart (2006), reviewing email use in journalism, cites the experience of one journalist on assignment and her source: 'Although she [Mui] conducted the main interviews over the phone, she checked in with her primary source via email over several days'. Furthermore,

> 'He was so much more quotable in an email than he was in the interview that I just used his emails' in the story, says Mui, who covers education for the Post's Howard County, Maryland, bureau. 'Some people are better with the written word than with the spoken word'. *(No page)*

4.5 Featherstone, Lyon and Ruffin (2008) describe use of phone *and* email interviews; that is, not just email. This is an important consideration. How do these two formats work together? Is the email primary, or does it become the main mode during the course of the interaction? It is not a question of right or wrong, but a matter of understanding how each works, or how they work interactively as data gathering methods, and then enhancing the value and minimising the limitations of each.

4.6 Thus, many of the issues of qualitative research can be seen in journalist use of email interviews in some form, even while points of time urgency and editorial direction and requirements are less closely applicable. What counts as an email interview in news gathering is likely to be much shorter than the exploratory nature of qualitative investigation, and it may involve power issues about public statement/being on the record, and related issues of authorisation, that are managed quite closely in contemporary social science ethics committees.

Email Interviewing as One Research Method

5.1 Email interviews can be very close to, even hybrid, with web based surveys, either by pasting into an email the questions and other material for respondents, or attaching it to the email as a separate document, or using email to direct people to a website (Orgad, 2005; 2008). In some instances this may be done by embedding a URL link in the email, which then can be simply clicked on to take the respondent to the relevant website.

5.2 When does an email interview become an email survey? What is the difference? Email to and from one person seems much more like an interview, whereas an email broadcast to substantial numbers of participants has most of the hallmarks, and often the actual label, of a survey. The distinction is not of course quite as tidy as that, and this broad statement can be qualified: an email might be a group conversation between two or more respondents with an initiating questioner. It can be interactive between participants, not solely with the questioner, as in other qualitative procedures such as focus groups. Material from such multiple exchanges is often all the richer for that layered interaction and cross-comment, challenge, and further elucidation or observation from others about the topic at hand.

5.3 Group email interaction might have similarities to group emails with which many organisational environments are familiar. Even when emails are one-to-one, the ways questions and responses are balanced and flow, is something for study in its own right, just as etiquettes of sitting down with respondents, table placement, and other contextual room cues, apply in a face-to-face interview (Kivits, 2005; O'Connor, Madge, Shaw and Wellens, 2008).

5.4 As well as there being several variants of email interviews, email interviews may sit, as Wilson (2006) shows, as one method within a multiple research strategy.

> Skytrax surveyed more than 7.2 million passengers from more than 90 countries. Survey data were collected from interviews completed online and by email; interviews with business research groups and travel panels; corporate travel questionnaires; telephone interviews, and selected passenger interviews. *(No page)*

Thus email, along with emerging research methods such as interviewing by Skype© and other web technologies, continues to enlarge research potential using digital interaction (e.g. blogs and social networking forms of communication).

5.5 The following veterinary sector statement (Anonymous, 2009) also shows emails as one form of data gathering among several, simultaneously revealing its value in cross-checking the validity of information derived from alternate sources.

> This report was constructed with secondary research into annual reports, government health data, trade and medical journals, supplemented with phone and *email interviews* with executives and experts in the industry. Interviews were used to test assumptions and fix forecasts in the report. *(No page)*

As Denscombe (2003: 133-4) observes, the value of triangulating is that it helps overcome limitations of any one method of research by itself.

Four Qualitative Examples of Data Gathering by Email

6.1 Four examples in this section successively illustrate email interviews used qualitatively in written autobiographies, in ethnographic fieldwork, in constructing autoethnographic narratives, and in an interview program.

Written Autobiography

6.2 Silverman and Marvasti (2008) refer to McKinney's research on whiteness, using graduate students' autobiographies as data. McKinney (2005) enlisted colleagues who, with the appropriate ethical processes,

> offered their students extra credit for contributing to my work, and the students sent me their autobiographies via email, which made it very much easier later to begin analysis of them (the originals I received were in hard copy, and I had to scan them into my computer). (p. 50)

6.3 McKinney explains her use of the email mode further.

> In order to guide students in their writing, I gave them a list of questions, the same that I had given to my class, that would give them the idea of the kinds of stories and experiences I was interested in. They were told that they did not have to answer every question, and could add any other information they felt was relevant. (p. 50)

6.4 Her comments here provide several clues in considering email methods of data gathering. As a result of this methodology, McKinney collected a substantial corpus of material: 'So the data for my dissertation came from three universities. I ended up with about 60 autobiographies'. Silverman and Marvasti's (2008: 50) comment that 'It is not uncommon for qualitative researchers to use their existing relationships and contacts for their research', also speaks to the social space within which email as a contemporary communication form creates opportunities for research.

6.5 In this example, the substantive content was created as written documents then sent by email (McKinney, 2005: 229). While this use of email is ideal in its cost, connection, and convenience senses, the substantive interview significance of email interviewing is only a variation on writing the personal accounts and sending them by 'snail mail' or hand delivering them. The email interaction mode is developed further in later examples. After citing McKinney in detail (Silverman and Marvasti 2008: 53) describing how she developed themes and subthemes to write her dissertation (like other qualitative research), Silverman and Marvasti identify a key dimension, 'Here we can see that not only are writing and analysis linked but that the data collection is also part of the same process'. This indeed suggests a significant enhancement email interviews may offer through a new capacity for checking and following up what an interviewee meant by a statement, or what they understand to be the connection between different parts of their accounts (e.g. Roberts, 2002).

Ethnographic Fieldwork

7.1 Another case that includes the use of email in research is outlined by Silverman and Marvasti (2008), although again this is not their primary focus in discussing this research project, which falls under a chapter section headed, 'Keeping in Touch'. They label the case study, 'Gender in East African Field Work'.

> Using observation coupled with face-to-face and email interviews, Ryen (2004) has been doing fieldwork on East African businesses. In part she is interested in the activities and identities of entrepreneurs of Asian origin. (p. 320)

The case study talks about crossing boundaries, a theme in Ryen's work.

7.2 Ryen does not actually discuss emails in the cited 2004 chapter, but in an earlier chapter (Ryen, 2001) she describes her ethnographic work in which email exchanges are an important part of her research, and she presents text of conversations to illustrate this. These researcher-participant interactions involve

similar things that non-email research does, such as negotiating differences between contact and friendship rather than implications about potential physical or other levels of intimacy (p. 440); and they show the researcher responding (stopping parts of the research) because of the religious meaning of events, rather than simply being the initiator to whom participants respond (p. 443). Ryen describes language ambiguities in email exchanges as an issue. Use of other internet media, specifically web pages, and knowledge of Western products, also comes up for discussion in her project. Collectively, exploring these practical matters suggests ways email usage can work in ethnography.

Autoethnographic Narratives

8.1 Another example of email use in qualitative inquiry is Buzzanell and D'Enbeau's (2009) study of links between academic work and 'women's everyday experiences':

> Using a case study of one employed mother as a starting point, the authors engage in writing-stories that combine the analyses of their email and face to face conversations from the last couple of years with various journal entries and interdisciplinary research. (p. 1199)

Some differences in this use of email from the present career transition study are evident.

8.2 First, it extends over a very long period – two years. Second, it is highly iterative - comments on comments on comments. Third, it is between friends; it is not simply friendly and personal, but assumes things, investigates things, at a level of intimacy beyond the reach of most interview programs. Fourth, part of this intimate knowledge of each other comes from sharing paid working lives as colleagues, as well as personal dimensions of life in supporting one another.

8.3 A value in the Buzzanell and D'Enbeau (2009) article is how it blends email and face-to-face interviews, treating emails seriously as a form of writing.

> We first explore caregiving through the use of writing - stories. Through writing as a method of inquiry, we foreground underlying assumptions to make visible and evaluate the difficult issues surrounding caregiving. We use writing-stories to weave together multiple data forms in 'a Postmodernist deconstruction of triangulation… [and] mixed-genre texts' and produce crystallized (i.e. genre-boundary breaking) insights about caregiving in everyday life. (pp. 1200-1201) *(references omitted)*

8.4 Thus it can be seen that email interviews engage the full range of methodological and theoretical themes of qualitative research. More examples can be seen in, for example, Meho's (2006: 1285) summary of fourteen email interview studies, five using both email and face-to-face interview data. Other useful discussions based on email experience can be found in Bampton and Cowton (2002), Curasi (2001), and Nettleton, Pleace, Burrows, Muncer and Loader (2002).

An Email Interview Program

9.1 A more fully developed instance of email use is Gibson's (2010) option for participants to choose email interviews 'in a qualitative, mixed method study of older (30+) music fans in three popular music 'scenes". This comes closest to the issues raised in the present career transition study. Gibson went further than the present study, having many more email interviews, fifty-five in total, and many rounds of email exchange. Perhaps of greater significance, however, was that she set out intentionally to use email interviews as part of her research strategy.

> I designed the same interview schedule for both face-to-face and email interviews and then offered participants a choice of which method they preferred. 15 chose a face-to- face interview and 55 chose an email interview. (2010, p. 4)

9.2 She then elaborates on the practical steps involved:

> I used an email address which contained my real name but set up a separate email account from my usual everyday one. I also used online discussion forums to recruit research participants. I set up an account and created a username that differed to my real name in this instance (this is common practice when using message boards) but revealed my real name once people had expressed an interest in taking part in the study. (2010, p.4)

Gibson discusses the predominance of male participants in her particular study, relating this to topic and demographics rather than the emailing process. Her advice (2010, p. 1) is that researchers 'thinking of using email interviews' should consider methodological questions such as, 'will the method produce the kind of data that is appropriate for your research questions?', as well as practical questions such as, 'have you got sufficient time to collect data this way?'

9.3 Gibson's descriptions of her research and discussion of issues it raises for her has a strong contemporary feel, using that term to mean a 2010 digital sensibility rather than a year 2000 sensibility in the ever-greater embedding of digital practices in society. She keep her comments grounded in her own work and avoids over-generalising, but provides useful conversation around matters such as length of time, reflection and crafting responses by both interviewees and researcher, the possibility of 'fake' responses, the issue of lack of spontaneity, and for some participants at least the pleasure of "authoring' their life experiences' (p. 6) via long emails.

Career Transition: Iterative Value in Email Interviewing

10.1 The present study of career transition illustrates the sequential value of email interviews in following up significant information or gaps in what has been earlier presented. The first email from one respondent disclosed two tantalising pieces relevant to her career shift into law. First, she describes in detail an incident when she was a young Englishwoman.

> When my husband and I bought our second house, funded by a two year contract stay in Kenya, we bought one on a new estate. When we instructed the fencer to put in the fence, our problems started (fencing is not done by the builder in England, merely some small boundary posts). Our garden, on the current plans of the estate, was three meters shorter than that which appeared on the plan which we had bought – three meters is a considerable length off the end of an English garden. Apparently, subsequent to our purchase, one of the roads had been redesigned, impacting upon the properties which were between the main road and the changed road.

> I contacted our solicitor [attorney], suggesting this was a problem, for we were not getting that which we had clearly purchased. Our solicitors' response was to pay final money owing, or they would sue us, and that they would offer no assistance on the problem at all. On hearing this I started investigating what was to be done, for we had the people whose garden bounded with the end of our garden, attempting to assert their boundary – though they purchased after we had (you cannot sell that which you do not have). The builders refused to discuss the problem, telling me to accept the difference. The head of the building company refused to acknowledge the problem, and refused to see me.

> I contacted the Land Titles Office (Central Land Registry in England), explained the problem and they took the only action they could – refusing to register all properties directly affected by this (in total about fifteen). After having complaints from purchasers about not being to register their properties, the Builders and the senior managers asked if they might meet with us. In exchange for giving up our three meters, they offered us about a third of an acre of land right next door to our garden – a good outcome.

> It was this transaction, at the age of 22, fighting for my family and coming up against complacent legal counsel and bullying builders, that I realised the power and the usefulness of the law.

10.2 My email respondent then went on to describe her later career transition into law. She had, prior to having children, 'enrolled myself in secretarial college', as her first career choice on leaving high school, with no direction or interest from her parents. This revealed another piece of the jigsaw how she shifted into law.

> We emigrated to Australia in 1982, and, when our youngest child was happily settled at primary school, I applied for the university's mature student scheme (I was 35 at the time – and had a 15 year old, 13 year old, and 9 year old. Family had, until this point, been my complete and sole focus). In my first year I took arts, wondering how I might cope with full-time study and the family. I coped well, and the next year applied to transfer to law school.

10.3 What she said was interesting, well expressed, and relevant to the subject of career transition. Since this last paragraph followed in the text of her written email just after her earlier story despite a gap of thirteen years, my respondent clearly saw them as connected. There seemed, however, a lot that was unsaid that might be explored, so in my next email I asked:

> Can you spell out for me the link between your experience as a 22-year-old buying a house, and your decision to switch from arts to law?

10.4 To which she replied in her next email, along with answers about other topics I had questioned her about in my follow up email:

> A few answers to your questions. When we had the legal dispute buying our house, I realised I could understand legal theories, and practice, and put them to practical purpose, but I just didn't think that people such as me took law. During my first year of arts, I met many women, such as me, who were taking law, and who appeared quite normal, and I reassessed my abilities during this first year – maybe the difference between attitudes in England compared with those in Australia? A couple of my friends, a year ahead of me, had switched and explained about the work-load, the requirements, and I trusted their assessment of what was needed. Social work had some interest, but I was surprised by the folk who were taking that course – very dogmatic, authoritarian, and generally lacking in empathy and compassion – odd.

In the first round, some main events and stages in her life had been set out. This next round added new elements to the chain of career transition.

10.5 It is not the purpose here to analyse the rich strands of commentary this further response provided in terms of understanding career transition processes. This paragraph revealed half a dozen themes for the substantive write-up of these interviews that were not explicit previously. The point here is the iteration of email interaction that allows time to both parties to construct a productive next response. Certainly email interviews are heir to all the positioning, emplotment, and other narrative and discursive issues that apply to other interview narratives. Emails lose the lived moment wherein sound, gesture and spatial setting form part of the exchange, on the one hand. On the other side, however, this form of interview allows analysis and reflection, extension for both parties (Gibson, 2010 p. 3). While some things are harder to say in

written form only, other things can be canvassed more readily. It is not a matter of either or, but of seeing how each works in different circumstances, and what opportunities each affords.

Email Interview Practices

11.1 The analysis of qualitative research use of emails described in this section draws on a range of researchers to extend reflection on how this form of interview works in practice. One observation that can be made is that in the career transition study, in all three of the email interviews, the suggestion to adopt this mode of interaction came from the participants themselves. These participants fitted Gibson's (2010, p. 2) term 'technologically proficient professionals'. Thus, in considering wider use of email interviewing as an investigatory technique, how respondent preference works as a limitation or enhancement of this mode of data collection, will influence research design. This also draws attention to email interview appropriateness, suitability for a given project, and how well it meets the research capabilities, interests, and willingness of the participant constituency.

Email as Transcription

11.2 A different sort of reflection relates to the theme of academic labour. Many postgraduate students as well as academic professionals find the effort and time involved in transcribing interviews the single most back-breaking task they have in producing research. Corridor admissions of 'cherry-picking' quotations and other techniques to 'manage down' this task are worthy of further research in themselves. The point of interest in the present study is how email interviews address this. The present researcher had just transcribed over two dozen of the early interviews – nearly half way through this phase of the research - when the serendipitous offers of these three email interviewees were made.

11.3 That context – a learning context for the researcher in the middle of the project - made the difference in the labour of transcription more acutely felt. Here were three sets of important new interview data - comments, opinions, interpretations, even humour reflecting on various things - that were *already* transcribed. Beyond copying each of them into a new document, there was zero transcribing labour involved. The next stage was straight to coding and analysis. In the middle of all that transcription labour this was so easy it felt almost dishonest! Could this be real and 'proper' interview data if it was so easy to collect? It is important, nonetheless, even amid the pleasure of how easy producing this immediately analysable text, to continue to reflect what other changes this email interviews format produces in the production and consumption of research data.

11.4 Admonitions about appropriate email usage in organisations can be seen on many websites and in company staff guidelines (e.g. Shipley and Schwalbe, 2008). Much email etiquette or convention also applies to qualitative research. Dicta such as, 'An email should always be treated like a postcard,' are worth following. That is, emails for one person should be written knowing that they can be read by many people, often in contexts completely foreign to that in which they were created. Promises, implications, humour, confidences, questions, all sit differently under public scrutiny – or in this case the potential scrutiny of family, friends, and acquaintances. Commercial businesses and politicians alike repeatedly re-discover this principle to their own discomfit. Ethical care needs to guide the researcher.

Email Questions

11.5 In any research situation, an important consideration is: 'How were questions presented to participants?' In the career transition project all potential interviewees were sent a copy of the information sheet as part of gaining their informed consent to participate. The final part of that information sheet listed the primary questions and question areas the interview proposed covering. Interestingly enough, though all these email interview participants had received this sheet, the same as the face-to-face potential interviewees, their offers of participating via the keyboard included the request that I present questions to them, that they would then 'have a go' at answering. This need for restatement of questions may be a more general point to note in setting up other email interview arrangements (see also later discussion here).

11.6 Some of the written accounts in these email interviews, as with the oral interviews, provided a 'potted history' much briefer and less explanatory than others. Subsequent emails then did a similar task that follow-up questions do in a face-to-face interview, trying to identify connections that were not immediately apparent to the researcher, gaining more detail. Thus, the further questions, pauses, laughs and other face-to-face expressions in the live situation of the oral interview seek functionally equivalent alternative channels in email interaction. Face, body, and room are not the basis of interaction, but there is still a live quality in the expectation of reading and replying to somebody's previous conscious effort to explain. While within this project these career changers into law have professional skills, in many other research situations the willingness to write, let alone extended writing, may well be much less.

11.7 The general brevity of email compared to traditional forms of interaction has its own effect on exchanges. Whereas phone calls often use orientating comment about the weather, the other party's welfare, or events of the day, these are often dispensed with in email communication. In qualitative research it is necessary to overcome, at least to some extent, the tendency for emails to be nothing more than clipped conversations. Further, email writers are able to change opinions between emails – they may revise, recant, or otherwise alter what has been previously stated.

Personal Touch

11.8 Even if email is not as full a mode of contact, personalisation of email interview exchange is largely lost when there is any perception of mass mailing (as happens in email surveys). Mitigating this might be

partly achieved by prior individual or telephone conversation that has established the willingness of the potential respondent to receive and participate in the email interview. Mann and Stewart (2000) describe the important of maintaining trust, through continuing email contact, obviously enough, since personal trust elements are not directly present as they can be in face-to-face meeting. Further definitional lines, then, might be drawn between the multiple (even if not 'mass') emailing of a group of participants in an email interview situation to avoid the issues of email/online surveying. Thus, while the labour of transcription might be addressed by email interviewing, any reduction in the emotional or personal labour of one-to-one correspondence is likely to significantly impact the quality of information offered.

11.9 Email interviews are thus more naturally communications with one person and one-off, a series of exchanges forming an interview (setting aside for the present discussion longitudinal research). Even though this email interview exchange might be a one-off, sequences, or period of interaction, within this the potential is for multiple rounds of question and response – two, three, or many more, depending on arrangements or how the exchange develops in the live circumstances of email query and response. At the very minimum, email acknowledgement by the researcher of participant views and comments (question-response-acknowledgement/ thanks), takes the process further than surveys (question-response).
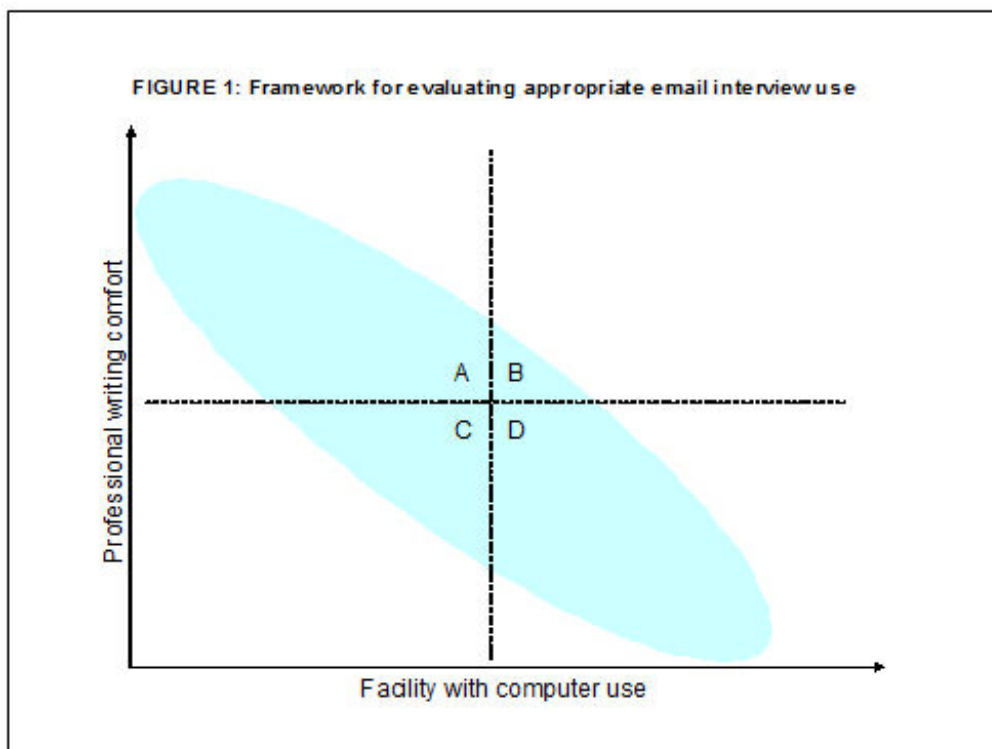
11.10 Further, an email interview is interactive on an individual basis, in that the researcher in turn responds to the interests and responses of an individual participant. This may be formal or casual interaction, and it may involve more or fewer iterations. Just as some spoken interviews are long and some are short, parallel variation occurs with emails conversations. A delightful example of the personal in the career transitions email interviews was this snippet:

> When I did law, our younger daughter thought 'I might give that a go, sounds interesting, and must be easy if Mum is doing it.' And so she did – though I think Uni gave her an intellectual run for her money.

It was important for me to acknowledge her personal self-deprecation in my subsequent email back to her (this was not hard), as part of the live connection that is more instantly sustained in a face-to-face situation: recognizing both content and manner; honouring the process, not simply the substantive focus of the interview.

Exploring Advantages and Disadvantages

12.1 The simple conceptual framework presented in Figure 1 provides one way of viewing relative advantages and disadvantages of email interviews. The two axes of the figure show the likelihood of participants being willing and able to be involved effectively in email interviews. This is based on two sets of existing capabilities-experiences they possess. The first is familiarity and skills with keyboard typing, here termed professional writing skills. The second is facility with computers, both in hardware and software, including general abilities in operating and keeping computers functioning. The greatest contrast is between the domestic occasional user and the professional user even when the latter is in the domestic setting. The indication of possible participant types in Figure 1 expresses the contrast between likely email interview participants who have double competencies and thus high comfort levels (in quadrant B), and those in quadrant C with largely absent experience in both realms. Assuming this level of capacity, Gibson (2010, p. 2) unpicked the gender balance of her participants suggesting that the degree of participant *interest* in a given research topic has an independent bearing on email writing. Quadrants A and D refer to individuals with more ambiguous, mostly one-competency, kinds of experience and expertise.

FIGURE 1: Framework for evaluating appropriate email interview use

The greyed area across the middle of the Figure indicates marginal viability for email interview use in social research, between probably no use below but high likelihood of email suitability above this. The clear portion of quadrant B is the area occupied by the present participants.

12.2 Why use emails? Because they confer a number of advantages, even though like any research method, they have limitations (Meho, 2006: 1292). Understanding appropriate use maximises the benefits and minimises the downsides. Emails compared to interviews do not require travel, or the need to dress up. They can be answered any time of day or night that suits. The cost of email interviews is practically zero. The convenience and reduced effort, although not sufficient reasons in themselves, are points of attraction in this method. When I first stumbled upon this email interview mode, it was because one of my prospective interviewees said that his overseas travel times may not suit the interview program, but that he was fine with providing me answers to questions by email; it was a practical response on both our parts that assumed the competencies of Figure 1.

Iterativity

12.3 Emails enable asking for successively more detail, or explanations of previous comment, as was seen in the career transition email interaction described above. Some people are not good at, or do not like, writing. You get spelling errors and typos, although in this particular sample of respondents, very few. It may be important to say to respondents that you are not worried about spelling or paragraphs if that issue comes up, if you are purposefully setting out to gather data through email in this way. Obviously people with disinclination to write, or without familiarity with keyboards in their working or leisure lives will not be adept at this kind of research participation. Examples abound of bright people (though not so many professionals), who are not confident spellers, who avoid emails and stay with the relative freedom to misspell and abbreviate that texting or verbal communication gives them.

12.4 Email cycles (initiating email, responding to email) can be rapid or episodic, close together or far apart but regular. It is worth noting Brown and Durrheim's (2009) objection to conventional interviews appearing to confirm – despite listening intentions to the contrary – that interview research is constituted by a questioner and an answerer/respondent, in a fairly clear-cut division. Brown and Durrheim advocate 'mobile interviewing' to disturb this 'tidiness,' and creating 'cobiographical and dialogical' interview exchanges (2009, p. 912). Email interviews, too, address this issue of conventional or interactional views about interview process. Although emails might be read to support either stance concerning research epistemology, contemporary mundane email use contributes to ongoing revision of what is an interview, and how this form of it adds to or modifies what happens in social research space.

12.5 Disadvantages include the cultural positioning of organisational email use for shorter communications. This may create an expectation in the minds of respondents. A question raised in this career transition project is whether there is a generational difference in how email writing is perceived. Older people may not always have the assumption of brevity as axiomatic, at least in non-work settings. Either way, in this use of the medium, you are trying to generate extensive answers if possible. This research with highly qualified, often double-degreed, people who were fluent writers professionally is thus not generalisable to all research projects.

Questions

12.6 Writing too many questions in one email results in diminishing value per question, as the limit of email size reaches some kind of culturally or personally perceived upper limit: very brief or too-general comments constrains the evidential basis for interpretive insights the researcher is seeking. Curasi (2001), for example, found that 'The online interview dataset included some of the strongest and some of the weakest interviews in the investigation'.

12.7 Positive encouragement to participants at the start of email contact and at points during exchanges, saying that it is useful to the project to write as much detail as possible, is one aspect. The present email participants responded in varying degrees to this encouragement. Another strategy is to make sure the question areas the researcher is interested in, are broken into appropriate 'bite size' pieces. A generic question like, 'How did you change careers?' is likely to simply get a paragraph-or-two-length answer, and the email respondent then thinks, 'That is one question answered'. However, breaking the same topic of interest up into four different questions about, say, when in life; the process involved; effect on family; and key advisors/confidants; or other similar subsections, has the effect that each of these is more likely to get one or two paragraph-length answers, a several-fold increase in useful information. Maintaining the interactivity by a sequence of questions, rather than all at once, is another approach likely to add to the amount and detail of what information is supplied (Bampton and Cowton, 2002).

12.8 Emails can be used in combination with other methods of data collection: with either face-to-face or telephone interviews, participant observation, focus groups, or documentary checking, for example. Gibson (2010, p. 2) points out it may be worth comparing email interviews to diaries as a research method (or to other methods) than the obvious comparison with face-to-face interviews. Nettleton et al. (2002) conducted a mixture of fifty email, phone, and face-to-face interviews. Given that phone and email are basic forms of communication today in qualitative interview programs, these provide already established follow-up procedures, for such things as saying thanks for the interview itself, and tools for developing mixed methodologies in social research (Bryman, 2008: 602-626).

Emails in Context

12.9 Email interviews do not provide body language and other contextual cues for the interviewer, but this

can be overcome to an extent in some circumstances by (1) meeting or phoning prospective email interviewees to set up arrangements, and debriefing later, or by (2) providing some personal detail via information sheet, website, or phone. Since the 'send button' does not convey nuances at an email distance, care with jokes and humour in email format is an important consideration in this mode of communication. Many transcripts of face-to-face interview research have '(prolonged laughter)' or '(pause),' as significant components of the interaction that are absent from email.

12.10 Bampton and Cowton (2002) make a number of observations that are worth examining when considering this kind of research, for instance:

> In permitting a lengthy delay between communications, an e-interview gives the interviewee time to construct a response to a particular question…. Asynchronicity also enables interviewees to reflect and then supply a considered reply. The time to consider their response might reduce the pressure felt by nervous interviewees, but on the other hand it also loses spontaneity. *(No page)*

Further elaboration by Bampton and Cowton and others is the kind of discussion that should today be standard in research methods texts.

Practice and Limitations

Emailing practices

13.1 Similar rules of friendly yet directed interaction guide an email exchange as they guide a face-to-face interview. There are, of course, some differences between these modes of data collection. One is written, while the other is oral. One is a live situation of two people adjusting, nanosecond by nanosecond, to the nuances of body, language, and gesture that each person generates, while listening or speaking. The other is a much slower dance of communication, email by sent email. There is time for thought and reflection before writing a sentence. Both, in their own ways, are live forms of communication.

13.2 At the same time, however, emails constitute a particular kind of written form. Emailing is, furthermore, a relatively new invention as a form of writing, as indeed are websites, blogs, texting, and instant messaging. The 'postcard' characteristic of emails (a problem in court cases when data is revealed to a wider public than originally intended), is not the main issue, but the characteristics of informality and brevity already mentioned here, are features that impact the interview form, and require negotiation in this kind of research.

13.3 Bryman (2008) is untypical, even today, in having a two-page chapter section devoted to email interviews: 'Qualitative inquiry using online qualitative interviews', (pp 642-3), although others have something similar to his 'E-research' chapter. Bryman summarises: 'At the time of writing, the possibilities associated with conducting online focus groups have attracted greater attention than online personal interviews' (p. 643). An arc of nearly a decade moves from O'Connor and Madge's (2001) comment, 'there have been few empirical studies' about email interviews, to Bryman's (2008) useful discussion in a mainstream research text. The widening range of qualitative email research projects, seen in Meho's (2006: 1285) summary and the examples discussed above, shows this transition occurring and how the field is growing.

Summarising Present Limitations

14.1 Wider use of emails as an interview technique needs definite focus and further work around some of the practicalities, strategies, challenges and ethical issues of email interview from. In particular, some of the limitations need to be thought through, for example, (1) as a method for engaging marginalised groups or populations, such as people with limited literacy, or those with no access to internet; (2) how to deal with the potential for drop out in populations (the grey band of Figure 1 and below); (3) development of research etiquettes for engaging the respondent in multiple email communications in order to complete interviews needing several rounds; and (4) 'rules of engagement' that are transparent for ethics committee decisions about when email interviews may be used within research. Concerns about 'faking' responses or disclosing 'unlawful or less socially acceptable behaviour' (Gibson, 2010, p. 4) are part of this.

14.2 There is a parallel here with the historically much earlier use and limits of phone-based methods in social research: only those with phone numbers were included in the research population. Rubin and Babbie (2009, p. 121) comment that such research is 'limited by definition to people who have telephones. Years ago, then, this method produced a substantial social class bias by excluding poor people from the surveys. Over time, however, the telephone has become a fixture in almost all American homes.' Today with emails social change and social research can be seen to alter over time.

Conclusion

15.1 My initial problem in understanding that interacting purposefully by email might be called an email interview, not just an aberration in my methodology, set off a sequence of reflection that has found comfort in the pioneering work of a number of qualitative researchers, and has explored some elaboration of methodological ideas about this qualitative practice. How do researchers report the number of interviews done in a project? A report saying, for instance, '…eight semi-structured interviews were conducted…', seems transparent about the evidential basis for the findings presented. But the definitional ground is shifting: there are email interviews, and phone interviews, and phone-email interviews, and participant-email interviews, email-and-face-to-face interviews, and more.

15.2 The development of new qualitative tools, then, adds further ambiguity to when is, or what is, an

interview or not an interview. This richness of possibility, however, is a potential boon to qualitative researchers who may have barely reflected on doing email interviews, or alternative ways of doing them. In many respects, email interviews or hybrid face-to-face and email interviews, represent a natural progression in what researchers are doing today with technologies available to them. Williams (1966) showed in some detail many years ago that new media mostly do not replace previous forms, but each is re-positioned. It seems that this is what is occurring here, in qualitative research as in society.

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