Chapter 4
Technologies for Conducting an Online Ethnography of Communication: The Case of Eloqi

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the author describes the technologies she employed while conducting an Ethnography of Communication on Eloqi (pseudonym), a for-profit start-up company that built and operated a proprietary Web-based, voice-enabled platform connecting English language learners in China with trainers in the United States. While Eloqi existed, its unique platform not only connected trainers and students for short one-to-one English conversation lessons but also brought together the company admins, trainers, and students in a virtual community. This chapter describes the technologies that the author used to carry out the qualitative study from start to finish, including the steps of online participant observations, online and offline interviews, qualitative coding, and qualitative data analysis. Because the author studied a virtual community, technologies played a critical role in how she collected, managed, and analyzed the dataset, which was completely electronic. The chapter concludes with tips and advice for fellow researchers using technologies to support qualitative studies of communication, whether online or offline.

INTRODUCTION

Imagine a private language school specializing in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) training. The students attending this school want to use their English language skills to change their lives, whether that means securing a place at a good university, getting a competitive job, or moving forward on their chosen career paths. The trainers want to gain instructional skills and add new experience to their portfolios, while also developing their professional network. The school founders and administrators want to attract sufficient students to turn a healthy profit, while also contributing to the educational field in innovative ways. Such was the case with Eloqi (pseudonym),

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an EFL school that I studied. What stood Eloqi apart was the fact that it was an online environment, and its different members (admins, trainers, students) never met one another face-to-face. The Eloqi founders built a proprietary web-based, voice-enabled platform to connect students and trainers for one-to-one conversation lessons. Eloqi’s only office was located in Beijing, its students were spread all over China, and the trainers were located across the continental United States. Eloqi was a virtual community, i.e. a group of people who are relationally involved with one another and share common (to the group) norms, rules, and practices, and who assemble and interact with one another online. (Komito, 1998; Kozinets, 2009; Rheingold, 1993) I engaged in an ethnographic study of Eloqi to learn about that community’s speech code, or code of communicative conduct, i.e. their norms, premises, and rules for engaging in speech with one another (Philipsen, 1997; Philipsen, Coutu, & Covarrubias, 2005). Eloqi’s Chief Technology Officer, an acquaintance of mine, was interested in and supportive of my research goals. He and his business partner had recently graduated from Stanford University and were excited to build up their new company. Reasoning that my research would help them better understand their own developing company culture as well as their trainers and students, Eloqi invited me to join their team as a researcher-trainer. In my researcher-trainer role I was allowed to teach lessons, attend weekly trainer meetings, socialize with the other trainers, participate in Eloqi’s trainer discussion forums, and access the company’s growing archive of trainer-student lesson recordings – all online. I actively studied the Eloqi community for 10 months using qualitative methods that included online participation observation and interviews. By the end of my data collection phase I had amassed a sizable assortment of electronic data, including lesson recordings, interviews, fieldnotes, screenshots, and more.

In this chapter I will describe the technologies that I used to collect, manage, and analyze my qualitative data. I will cover the technological configurations that I assembled to support my online participant observations and hold my online and offline interviews. I will describe how I organized and managed my electronic dataset. Finally, I will explain the tools that I used for the data analysis phase, including the qualitative data analysis software that I used for coding, analysis, and reporting. My chapter will conclude with tips and advice for other researchers who are using technologies to support qualitative studies of communication, whether online or offline.

BACKGROUND

My aim in this research project was to identify the Eloqi community’s system of rules, norms, and premises pertaining to communicative conduct, i.e. their speech code (Philipsen, 1975, 1992, 1997; Philipsen et al., 2005). For this purpose I employed the Ethnography of Communication (Hymes, 1962, 1972, 1977; Philipsen & Coutu, 2005). The Ethnography of Communication (EC) is a qualitative theoretical/methodological framework distinct from, but closely related to, ethnography. Ethnography, like EC, is geared towards studying human behavior and culture, and is intended to “[reveal that culture] through discerning patterns of socially shared behavior” (Wolcott, 1999, p. 67). What makes EC different is its unique combination of “ethnography, the description and analysis of culture, with linguistics, the description and analysis of language” to produce contextualized analyses of the “relationships between language and culture” (Keating, 2001, p. 285). The EC approach, particularly in combination with theoretical/methodological frameworks like Speech Codes Theory, generates nuanced reports on how members of a given community speak with one another, the rules and values guiding that speech, and the concepts of personhood and society linked with it (Philipsen & Coutu, 2005; Philipsen et al., 2005). The EC