Chapter XXVII
Web-Based Survey Software for Academic Research

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ABSTRACT

The features of Datacurious, a Web-based survey software program designed specifically for academic research, are examined in this article. Web-based data collection has been deemed an effective, reliable, and safe method of data collection, while also saving researchers time, effort, and cost, and reducing data entry error. Recent developments in Web-based survey software systems allow data to be collected through relatively simple, easy-to-use interfaces, making the technology accessible to researchers with little to no technical expertise. Datacurious, available online at http://www.datacurious.com, utilizes an intuitive and user-friendly interface with broad capabilities in its survey designer. Programming enables researchers to adhere to ethical guidelines for surveying human subjects. Technical features of Datacurious ensure survey participant privacy and confidentiality and provide options for informed consent, incentive, and debriefing pages. Datacurious also allows researchers to control entry to online surveys. Providing a flexible and robust Web-based survey platform, Datacurious accords to Web-design standards in survey design, while being responsive to the needs of the academic research community.

INTRODUCTION

The growth of the Internet has generated interest in the potential of using the Web for data collection (Kittleson, 1997; Schaefer & Dillman, 1998; Schleyer & Forrest, 2000; Schmidt, 1997; Stanton, 1998). Researchers have begun to move towards conducting more Internet research using online surveys, and the results of these studies can be found in many popular academic journals (Granello & Wheaton, 2004). There has been less discussion in the research community about the process of data collection online (Granello & Wheaton, 2004). Online surveys have been implemented via e-mail and Web-based technology (through Web pages). Data collection through Web-based technology has been deemed an effective method of data collection for a variety of methodologi-
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cal reasons, as well as for its efficiency and cost effectiveness (Birnbaum, 2004; Cho & LaRose, 1999; Crawford, 2002; Granello & Wheaton, 2004; Hewson, Laurent, & Vogel, 1996; Kiesler & Sproull, 1995; Kraut et al., 2004; Schleyer & Forrest, 2000; Schmidt, 1997; Sills & Song, 2002; Wyatt, 2000). While data collection through Web-based technology is arguably one of the best methods of conducting survey research, there has been little review of the various methodological and technical approaches researchers may use in collecting their data online through Web pages (Granello & Wheaton, 2004; Schmidt, 1997). Furthermore, few attempts (Crawford, 2002) have been made to review current applications available for Web-based data collection. Thus, this chapter will review the features of Datacurious, a survey software program enabling Web-based data collection for academic research. It will also evaluate the program according to its ability to maximize the advantages of online data collection, while minimizing the disadvantages.

Until recently, researchers who wished to collect data on the Internet through Web-based technology required sophisticated technical knowledge (Schmidt, 1997) because online surveys were often developed utilizing specialized programming languages. In the past few years, comprehensive software systems have been developed that enable Web-based data collection through relatively simple, easy-to-use interfaces, making publishing surveys online possible for researchers with little to no technical expertise (Crawford, 2002). With the emergence of comprehensive software systems for Web-based data collection, there has been no clear consensus about what constitutes a good survey design application (Crawford, 2002). Crawford (2002) proposed several specifications for a good quality Web-based data collection system: adherence to Web survey design standards, flexibility, and robustness. Furthermore, in his article, Crawford (2002) discusses the necessity for researchers to find programs that contain the tools necessary to meet their particular research needs. Given the fact that many comprehensive software systems have been developed by technical programmers, not necessarily researchers engaged in academic research, this point is particularly important. One advantage offered by a Web-based data collection program, such as Datacurious, is that it was developed in collaboration with academic researchers. The authors of this chapter worked closely with the principal programmer with design requirements and specifications and supervised beta-testing of the product by a variety of research teams at a large west coast university. The net result is a program that includes a wide range of features that accounts for key methodological issues in survey research and adheres to the ethical requirements related to conducting human subjects research.

Datacurious is an interactive Web-based data collection program that can be found online at http://www.datacurious.com. Researchers utilizing Datacurious may visit the Web site and gain full access to the survey design program and publisher without purchasing any software on compact disc or downloading any software programs. The only requirement is a Web browser to access the application. Surveys are designed through a Web interface and published online for the purposes of data collection. Datacurious hosts the surveys throughout the data collection process and stores all collected data for researchers, which may then be downloaded onto their personal computers. Thus, researchers do not require a dedicated Web server to host surveys, which reduces the resources, and thus cost, associated with implementing online surveys. One of the benefits of Datacurious is that new users may visit the Web site, create a secure personal account, and gain full access to the survey designer, allowing researchers to test the program’s compatibility with their research needs prior to purchasing any survey product(s).