USING THE INTERNET TO CONDUCT QUALITATIVE HEALTH RESEARCH:
METHODOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL ISSUES

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Master of Science
Graduate Department of Community Health
University of Toronto

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ABSTRACT

Using the Internet to conduct Qualitative Health Research: Methodological and Ethical Issues
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While developments in information technology provide unique opportunities for researchers, they pose many challenges as well. This thesis examines the methodological and ethical issues involved in using the Internet to conduct a naturalistic, qualitative study of an electronic mutual aid/self-help (MASH) group. Field notes, generated by the researcher, were used in conjunction with archived e-mail postings and semi-structured on-line interviews in the analysis of how the Internet influenced both the social setting and the research process.

As a social setting for research, the electronic MASH group was characterized by "fluid" boundaries, and this had implications for theoretical sampling and for participants' experiences of support. Furthermore, the lack of a shared time/space context facilitated and hindered the process of implementing qualitative methodology (e.g. conducting interviews) and necessitated a re-examination of methodological and ethical issues critical to qualitative research (e.g. meaning of boundaries, public/private distinction).
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Development of the Thesis Focus

This thesis converges on two contemporary trends in Western society. First, there has been a great proliferation of mutual aid/self-help (MASH) groups in both Canada and the United States in recent years, suggesting that these groups represent a significant support to formal (i.e., medical) health care. Second, as a consequence of recent developments in computing and communications, electronic communication via computer networks (e.g., e-mail) is becoming more commonplace, and is transforming the ways in which individuals communicate and interact. These computer networks, collectively known as “the Internet”, transcend physical space and do not require a shared time context for communication or social interaction, thus producing unique forms of social collectivities often referred to as “virtual communities”.

One popular mode of communication and interaction via the Internet occurs through the use of electronic mailing lists. Using e-mail as the basis of communication, mailing lists enable people in physically remote locations to interact and exchange messages on topics of common interest. Many mailing lists available on the Internet are comparable to electronic MASH groups in which the topic of interest is coping with a shared problem or life situation. Like face-to-face groups, these mailing lists mediate mutual support by providing individuals with a forum for the exchange of information and emotional support around a common concern. However, unlike conventional MASH groups, the mutual support process in
electronic support groups occurs entirely through the exchange of typed e-mail messages.

The characteristics of communication by e-mail are distinct from those of face-to-face communication. In short, individuals who communicate by e-mail are not required to occupy the same physical or geographical space, nor are they required to communicate within a shared time frame since individuals can send and retrieve e-mail messages at their own leisure. Given these differences, the original research question addressed by this thesis proposed to explore how individuals experienced computer-mediated support, and how this may be similar to, or different from, mutual support in face-to-face groups. Using a conceptualization of MASH groups as therapeutic learning communities, qualitative research methods, including personal document/e-mail analysis and on-line interviews, were used to address this research question with members of a mailing list for assisting people with quitting smoking. A secondary objective of the original research was to explore the feasibility of applying naturalistic, qualitative research methodology and conventional ethics protocols in the study of a computer-mediated group.

Once in the "field", it became evident that the methodological and ethical issues involved in using the Internet to conduct qualitative research were, in and of themselves, worthy of in-depth empirical investigation. In addition, conducting interviews via e-mail made it extremely difficult to obtain in-depth information from interview respondents regarding their experiences of the list. This, in turn, precluded a truly inductive analytical process necessary for the generation and verification of conceptual categories with which to describe the experiences of the
mailing list participants. As a result, the focus of this thesis shifted to an in-depth examination of the methodological and ethical issues involved in using the Internet to conduct qualitative health research.

Focus and Relevance of Thesis

In this thesis I examine the methodological and ethical issues involved in using the Internet to conduct naturalistic, qualitative health research with a computer-mediated MASH group. This examination is presented in two analytical layers. First, the influence of the technology on the logistics and process of implementation of the research methodology is described. Generated from field notes, these reflections on the methodological and ethical issues encountered in the “field” are organized in terms of the stage of research in which the issues were encountered (see Chapter Five). While unique to the present study, these methodological and ethical dilemmas experienced in the “field”, were nested in broader issues of qualitative research. However, the use of computer networking technology (i.e. Internet) to conduct the present research added new dimensions to these issues. In Chapters Six and Seven, these larger issues are re-visited and the implications of computer networking technology for these issues are addressed.

Critical reflection on the methodological and ethical implications of using the Internet to conduct health research is timely. Within the Canadian context, the application of networking technologies is viewed as an efficient and cost-effective alternative to current practices in many areas, including the public health sector.
While the opportunities that computer networking provides in facilitating access to data or social groups are often touted as advantages of the technology, much less attention has been directed to how the electronic mediation of research transforms the object of study and the process of the research itself. It is hoped that issues raised in this thesis will highlight important questions that researchers should consider in the study of computer-networked groups, and/or in the collection and use of data stored on computer networks.

**Organization of The Thesis**

The thesis is presented in eight chapters.

**Chapter Two** provides background for the study by giving a review of relevant literature in the areas of mutual aid/self-help and relevant information from the field of computing and communications. The self-help literature focuses primarily on the various conceptions of MASH groups, and identifies the assumptions underlying these conceptions. The selected conceptual framework for the study of MASH groups is explicated. Also, a brief history of the development of the Internet, and the impact that this has had on the way individuals communicate, is provided. Finally, the ways in which computer networking technology is currently being used to mediate on-line, or electronic, MASH groups are discussed.

**Chapter Three** outlines the original research question and describes the methodological approach suitable to address this research question. Then, revisions to the original research question are discussed, noting in particular the shift in emphasis to an evaluation of using a naturalistic, qualitative research
methodology in electronic research settings. The rationale underlying this shift is also articulated.

Chapter Four opens with a detailed description of the research setting to provide the reader with a sense of how the electronic MASH operated on a day-to-day basis. In particular, general descriptions of the mailing list structure, subscribers, and events are given in order to contextualize the methodological and ethical findings discussed in Chapters Five, Six and Seven. Then, the research design and methods that were employed in the study are described in detail. The ethical considerations that were involved with conducting research on-line are discussed, including the methods that were used to obtain informed consent and protect participants' identities. The strategies that guided data analysis are outlined.

Chapter Five presents the "raw" methodological and ethical findings as they were encountered by the stage of research in which they occurred. This provides the reader with a sense of how the technology influenced the logistics and process of implementing the research methodology at different points of the study.

Chapter Six builds on findings outlined in Chapter Five to consider methodological implications of using the Internet to conduct naturalistic, qualitative research. This chapter describes the broader methodological issues within which the methodological findings of Chapter Five are nested, and discusses how they were re-framed by the computer networking technology that mediated the research. Each issue is examined in terms of how the issue is manifested in face-to-face
research. Then the ways in which the use of networking technology problematizes the issue is considered.

Chapter Seven builds on findings outlined in Chapter Five to consider the ethical implications of using the Internet to conduct naturalistic, qualitative research. This chapter focuses primarily on conceptions of “public” and “private” in face-to-face research contexts, and considers how networking technology re-frames the meaning of “public” and “private” domains. The assumptions underlying competing metaphors of “Internet as Information Highway” versus “Internet as Cyberspace” are unpacked and are related to the meaning of privacy in computer-networked contexts.

Chapter Eight re-visits the study objectives and reiterates the main findings and conclusions of the study. Then, the implications of the findings for future research in electronic settings are outlined.
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

This thesis converges on two growing trends in Western society. First, recent developments in computing and communications have led to an increase in the number of people that communicate by way of computer networks (e.g. the Internet). Second, in recent years there has been a rapid proliferation in the number of mutual aid/self-help groups in North America. The literature review that follows is not intended to be an exhaustive review of research in each of these areas. Rather, the purpose of this literature review is to “tile” together relevant concepts and ideas that informed the research question and provide a background to the findings that emerged during the research process.

The Emergence of the Internet

Often referred to as the world’s largest computer network, the Internet is essentially a network of interconnected computer networks (Johnston, Johnston, & Handa, 1995). The Internet as it is known today began as ARPANET, developed in the 1960s and 1970s for military purposes by the U.S. Department of Defense’s Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA). The significance of the ARPANET was its elimination of a centralized communications commands center, and its development and use of a distributed communications strategy based on “packet switching technology” (Johnston et al., 1995; Rheingold, 1993). Using this
technology, the computer network (e.g. ARPANET, the Internet) operates as a "distributed database", allowing "many-to-many" communication, as opposed to a centralized database, allowing for only "one-to-many" communication. Johnston, Johnston and Handa (1995) articulate the advantages of this communications strategy in simplistic technical terms:

In contrast to a centralized database stored in one computer, the Internet operates as a ‘distributed database’. Data are distributed among computers across the globe. These computer sites are linked via telephone lines, dedicated telecommunication lines, microwave towers and satellites. At present, one central database cannot store all of the information accessible on the Internet. This is one advantage of a ‘distributed’ storage method., p.17

An unintended consequence of the ARPANET was the way in which researchers used the network to communicate with one another about topics not related to their research:

As soon as ARPANET went online, people started sending electronic mail, far beyond the requirements of maintaining the network. ... The first large list, the first to foster its own culture, ARPANET veterans recall, was SF-LOVERS, a list of ARPA researchers who wanted to participate in public discussions about science fiction. SF-LOVERS started appearing publicly on ARPANET in the late 1970s. Attempts were made to suppress it, because it clearly fell outside even the most liberal interpretation of research related activities (Rheingold, 1993), pp. 76-77

Soon after the introduction of the ARPANET, academic researchers found that this technology provided a useful way of communicating with their colleagues, and the ARPANET networking model was adopted as a standard for supporting local area networks in academic centres. Then, in the late 1980s, the American National Science Foundation officially extended the use of this networking technology beyond military purposes by setting up five "supercomputer" facilitates in
American universities in order to promote academic research (Johnston et al., 1995; Rheingold, 1993).

Today, the Internet reaches far beyond the domains of the military and academe to include the general public. This increase in the number of individuals who use the Internet can be attributed to a number of factors, including drastic increases in the number of home computers, and the development of relatively fast and affordable modem technology allowing for access to computer networks from non-central locations. Computer literacy has also increased drastically since 1989 (Frank, 1996). Estimates of Internet use are difficult, however, if not impossible, to predict with any level of accuracy. A conservative estimate in May 1995 suggests that there are over 30 million computer users with Internet connections world-wide, with this number more than doubling each year (Johnston et al., 1995).

While the Internet is increasingly accessed by the general public, access is not universal. Recent surveys indicate that ownership of home computers and modems varies directly with income, and age and education appear to have influences that are independent of income. Also, households in urban areas tend to be better equipped with computers and modems than households in rural areas (Dickinson & Sciadas, 1997; Frank, 1996).

**Computer-Mediated Groups: Connecting over the Internet**

The emergence of the Internet has had a profound influence on the ways in which individuals interact and communicate. One way in which the Internet is
commonly used by individuals to communicate with one another is through electronic mail, or e-mail. Using e-mail, individuals can send and receive messages to and from other individuals (with an e-mail address) anywhere on the globe. In addition to facilitating communication across geographical spaces, e-mail is especially useful for the transmission of information to a number of individuals simultaneously, and can be used to hold forums or discussions on selected issues. Rheingold (1993) elaborates on this in the following passage:

One of the characteristics of e-mail is that it is easy to send a one-line message or a hundred-page file to one or a thousand people. You just make an automatic mailing list that contains the addresses of the people you want to reach. Another characteristic of e-mail is that you can reply to any message that arrives in your private electronic mailbox by typing one keystroke ("R" for "reply, on most systems). If you get a message from one person on a mailing list, you can reply privately to that person, or you can reply to everybody on the list. Suddenly, correspondence becomes a group conversation. Private lists continue to proliferate today as a way for individuals to create their own personalized conferencing systems: "roll your own" virtual communities. (Rheingold, 1993), pp 76-77

More and more, computer-mediated communication is becoming a form of human interaction in technologically developed societies. E-mail, for example, is often used as a complement or replacement to other communication channels, including surface mail, telephone, and face-to-face meetings (Beals, 1992; Schaefermeyer & Sewell, 1988). As computer-mediated communication becomes more commonplace, more and more individuals are "meeting" and forming relationships over computer networks (Lea & Spears, 1995; Reid, 1994; Rheingold, 1993; Smith, unpublished). To date, many different types of social formations have arisen on the Internet, each developing its own standards and norms for
communication and conduct (Newby, 1993). Despite the large number of groups that form and "meet" on-line over computer networks, there is relatively little research addressing the social aspects of relationship and group formation via computer-mediated communication. While this is reasonable given that human interaction occurs primarily in face-to-face contexts, there is a clear gap in knowledge regarding the nature and experience of social groups that are mediated by computer networks.

"Virtual Communities": The Debate

The growing trend of using computer networks as a way to connect with others has been accompanied by a public debate of whether these computer-mediated social formations constitute virtual "communities". This public discourse has largely focused on whether these new social formations are indeed real "communities". Various positions have been taken with regard to this debate and range from analyses of computer networking as providing a new kind of informal public space (e.g. Rheingold, 1993), to analyses of computer networking as a new form of exclusionary practice based on computer and Internet access and technological competence (e.g. Stuart, 1995). This debate raises two particularly interesting points that bear on the phenomenon of computer-mediated MASH groups. First, the contention surrounding the notion of computer networked "communities" implicitly acknowledges the profound influence that communication media have on social organization and behaviour. Thus, it is interesting to consider
how the electronic mode of communication influences the relationships and processes observed in computer-mediated support groups. Second, this debate highlights the dissensus regarding the concept of "community" in face-to-face contexts (Lyon, 1989). That is, the lack of consensus regarding traditional definitions of "community" becomes especially noticeable when one considers how "community" might be formed and sustained in settings that are not bound by geographical space.

Mutual Aid/Self-Help (MASH) Groups: Background Information and Definition

The proliferation of MASH groups in both Canada and the United States in recent years suggests that these groups comprise a significant support system apart from formal (i.e., medical) health care. It has been estimated that 6.25 million persons per year use MASH groups in the United States with the number of MASH groups in the hundreds of thousands (Borkman, 1990a; Jacobs & Goodman, 1989; Powell, 1990). Similarly, Canadian research has identified 2% of the population (420,000) as giving and/or receiving support in a MASH group (Gottlieb & Peters, 1991).

Research in the area of mutual aid and self-help has been plagued by a general lack of consensus regarding the defining attributes of mutual aid/self-help (MASH) groups. An integration of the definitions used by Madara, Kalafat, and Miller (1988) and Borkman (1990b) provides a useful definition for this study:
Mutual aid/self-help groups are member-governed, voluntary, non-profit associations or networks of individuals who share a common concern, malady or life situation, and who rely on experiential knowledge at least partly to mutually solve or cope with their common concern/s.

This definition of mutual aid/self-help has been selected for use in the present study for four reasons. First, this definition emphasizes the reliance on experiential knowledge, and therefore highlights the importance of pragmatic information derived from having actually experienced a phenomenon, and the conviction that insight and information rooted in direct experience is an authority of truth as a result of having "been through it" (Borkman, 1976). Second, this definition is consistent with many other definitions provided in the literature (Katz & Bender, 1976; Schubert & Borkman, 1991). Third, this definition distinguishes MASH groups from other groups that do not rely on experiential knowledge and/or provide only short term intervention (e.g. group therapy, family/peer networks, self-study groups) (Schubert & Borkman, 1991). Last, this definition emphasizes that control and governance of the group is by the MASH group members (Borkman, 1990b; Humphreys & Rappaport, 1994). Typically professionals will participate in a peripheral, ancillary role at the request of MASH group members [Borkman, 1995 #32].

An additional, fundamental characteristic of MASH is the mutual direction of support between helper and helpee. Romeder (1989) clearly articulates the helper-helpee relationship in MASH groups, and relates this to the distinct nature of helping methods used in these groups:

At first new members receive support from other group members. Later they discover their own capacity for helping and develop a feeling of equality with
other members. By participating in the group, they are able to play the role of helper-helpee (also referred to as self-helper), a person who, being conscious of his or her capacities and needs and those of others, knows how to give and receive help at the same time. It is through the practice of mutual aid that the self-helper in his helper role is able to accept the person receiving help as a true equal; there is not place for feelings of superiority or inferiority. It is senior members, or veterans, who most often play the role of helpers in a self-help group.... This description of the self-helper reveals a fundamental characteristic of self-help that makes it unique among the helping methods and is responsible for so much of its success; even as a self-helper assists another, he or she is also receiving help. In day-to-day life, we tend to consider that one person (the helper) gives, and the other (the helpee) receives. The magic of self-help is that the self-helper simultaneously gives and receives., p. 32, original emphasis

Conceptualizing MASH Groups: Competing Paradigms

MASH Groups as Human Service Agencies The majority of research on MASH groups has focused on determining the effectiveness of these groups in alleviating or improving the problem around which the group originally formed. The preoccupation with such questions is informed by a conceptualization of MASH groups as rationally planned, human service agencies that have the primary goal of "treating" specific problems. This underlying conceptual framework has been explicitly stated in some of the literature (Reissman & Carroll, 1995). By focusing on the "effectiveness" of MASH groups, this approach assumes that the "treatment" delivered by MASH groups represents a specific, short term, and discrete intervention (as in a drug dosage) (Borkman, 1994). Thus, the effects of this "treatment" can presumably be measured quantitatively by measuring and comparing the "subject's" status both before and after the "treatment" (Borkman, 1994). By equating MASH groups with "treatment" delivery, this conception has
precluded a serious consideration of MASH groups as qualitatively unique social realities distinct from professional help and health care (Borkman, 1990b).

**MASH Groups as Therapeutic Learning Communities** This research is informed by an underlying conceptualization of MASH groups as therapeutic learning “communities”. This conceptualization defines MASH groups not as service agencies, but rather as “experiential learning commons” or “normative communities” in which worldviews are developed around a common problem (Humphreys & Rappaport, 1994). Consistent with this framework is the idea that “self-helpers”, using their own framework or worldview, are empowered by naming and legitimizing their common problem using experiential knowledge, as they find both professional and lay definitions of the problem inadequate (Borkman, 1990b).

In this sense, MASH groups are conceptualized as socially supportive groupings rather than treatments for specific problems. As a consequence, analyses of MASH groups using this framework tend to emphasize the process of support occurring within MASH groups in addition to the alleviating effects of support groups on the shared problem or concern. This is not to say, however, that alleviation of the problem or concern and increases in social support are mutually exclusive outcomes of involvement in MASH groups. Rather, this framework is useful because it does not assume that treatment (i.e., impact) goals are foremost in importance to individuals who participate and benefit from MASH groups.

The conceptualization of MASH groups as therapeutic learning “communities” has been supported by previous research. In a review of research in the area of mutual support and self-help, Humphreys and Rappaport (1994) report
that participants often make friends and communicate between meetings, and that those participants having a high degree of contact between meetings derive greater benefit from the group. The role of experiential knowledge in MASH groups is also highlighted by studies indicating that members use experiential knowledge to correct both lay and professional perspectives of the problem in (Borkman, 1990b; Humphreys & Rappaport, 1994). Indeed, many participants themselves argue that MASH groups do not exist to offer services, but instead to advocate a new philosophy. For instance, members of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) adhere strongly to the claims that alcoholism is an incurable illness, that the process of change can begin only once the alcoholic has hit “rock bottom”, and that only then can the alcoholic begin to remedy his/her alcoholism (Romeder, 1989). That MASH groups provide a general social outlet, as well as a means to cope with presenting problems, is further supported by findings indicating that even after distress caused by the problem is ameliorated, meetings still provide the basis for friendship and social activity among members (Humphreys and Rappaport, 1994). Furthermore, evaluation studies in which self-helpers report high group satisfaction, despite little or no difference between MASH groups and comparison groups on health and/or psychosocial scores, not only suggest that MASH groups have a social function extending beyond the presenting problem, but also underscore the serious deficiencies in using traditional, positivistic “scientific” protocols to determine the “true” value of self-help groups (Humphreys & Rappaport, 1994; Tebes & Kraemer, 1991).
Methodological Implications: The major methodological implication of conceptualizing MASH groups as "communities" is that these groups should be studied in context, without disruption in group functioning from imposed experimental control, so that it is possible to obtain information about the meaning of members' experiences as participants in the groups, as well as how members name their problems and choose to remedy those problems. To date, however, there has been very little research on naturally occurring MASH groups (Goldklang, 1991). Thus, there is a need for research which is interpretive, exploratory, process-focused, which studies these groups in their natural context, and which does not emphasize health outcome as a priority for research (Borkman, 1994; Chesler, 1991; Goldklang, 1991; Humphreys & Rappaport, 1994; Tebes & Kraemer, 1991). Through the use of exploratory research and qualitative research methods, more can be learned about the meanings underlying members' experiences with MASH groups, including how members define and experience their involvement with a MASH "community".

The Internet as a Medium for Mutual Aid: Electronic MASH Groups

Certain computer-mediated groups are comparable to face-to-face mutual support or self-help groups in that the topic of discussion is largely devoted to the common experience of coping with an illness or distressful life situation. Like face-to-face MASH groups, the electronic "conversations" that take place in these groups focus on, but are not limited to, information, advice, plans for advocacy, and
emotional support related to the common concern (Madara, 1991; Nader, 1995). Unlike their face-to-face counterparts, however, individuals belonging to electronic MASH groups interact and communicate entirely through typed (e.g. e-mail) messages. Contrary to what some may expect, the interactions occurring within these MASH groups can be highly personal in nature. For example, it is not uncommon for members of electronic support groups to explicitly acknowledge when others have not been "present" (i.e. have not sent messages to the group) for an extended period of time (Madara, 1991), and for members to periodically divulge private information (e.g. telephone numbers) when responding to the personal crises of others. Also, computer-networked groups, including electronic MASH groups, often develop distinct "cultures" with their own norms and rules for participation (Newby, 1993; Rheingold, 1993).

Although there is no known study comparing the attributes of face-to-face versus computer-mediated support groups, there are likely distinctions between the quality and/or quantity of the mutual support they elicit due to the differences between the two modes of communication. For instance, the interactions occurring within computer-mediated support groups are aspatial (distance does not affect relationships), asynchronous (staggered, not sequential), acorporal (no physical copresence required), astigmatic (no visible social information available), and relatively anonymous (Smith, unpublished). These qualities of computer-mediated communication make on-line support groups particularly appealing for some. For example, for those individuals who are limited physically, (e.g. single parent), and/or emotionally (Ferguson, 1987; Harris, 1987; Jamer, 1994; Madara, 1991; Sparks,
who are in geographically remote locations (Madara, 1991), or who suffer from stigmatizing conditions, electronic support groups can provide the means to obtain valuable information and/or to participate in an ongoing dialogue about a shared life circumstance or physical condition. However, marginalized social groups may be the least likely to afford the costs associated with computer ownership and Internet access.

Introduction to the Original Research Question

To date, the majority of what is known about electronic support groups is based on brief descriptive accounts. Often, these accounts emphasize the advantages that such groups have in overcoming geographic, physical and/or social barriers to mutual support (Ferguson, 1987; Harris, 1987; Jamer, 1994; Madara, 1991; Sparks, 1992). In-depth analyses of the influence of networking technology on the mutual support process, however, are limited. Furthermore, there is a lack of consideration of the methodological and ethical implications involved in researching on-line groups and “communities”.

This thesis began as an empirical investigation of how individuals experience computer-mediated mutual aid/self-help. Using a naturalistic, qualitative methodological approach, the original goal of this research was to explore in-depth how participants experienced an electronic MASH group. Given the qualitative differences in interaction styles between face-to-face and computer-mediated contexts, this methodological approach was appropriate since the experience of
computer-mediated groups may be severely limited by frameworks developed for studies of face-to-face groups. As a consequence of difficulties experienced in using the Internet to implement naturalistic research methodology in an electronic social setting, the focus of the thesis was revised. As a result, the revised research goal focused on primarily on the methodological and ethical issues involved in using networking technology (i.e. the Internet) to conduct naturalistic research. In addressing this research question, this thesis represents a preliminary understanding of the ways in which computer networking technology transforms the process of conducting qualitative research on-line.

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1 A very simplified version of the history of the development of the Internet is presented here. Rheingold (1993) provides a more in-depth account.
2 Briefly, "packet switching technology" refers to the transfer of data between two points that are not directly connected. The information is broken down into "packets", each carrying the encoded address of the final destination, and is routed through a succession of interconnected computers until it reaches the final destination, at which point the data are reassembled.
3 The various types of communication technologies include, but are not limited to, Internet Relay Chat (IRC), Multi-User Domains (MUDs), Mailing Lists and Newsgroups. IRC and MUDs enable real-time (i.e. synchronous) communication among participants. Mailing lists and newsgroups use electronic mail for communication. Thus, the timing of giving and receiving messages is not in real-time (asynchronous).
4 For a wide range of views on this debate, see the March-April 1995 issue of the UTNE Reader.
5 Experiential knowledge is in contrast to professional knowledge which may be defined as "truth which is developed, applied, and transmitted by an established specialized occupation" (Borkman, 1976, p. 447).
6 Lay knowledge is distinguished from experiential knowledge in that lay people, while not professionals, do not have the "hands on" experience of having actually lived through the phenomenon or situation in question (see Borkman, 1990b).
7 Note that these computer-mediated support groups refer specifically to those conducted in non-real time (e.g. e-mail) and not those running on software supporting real-time communication in which interaction is not asynchronous.
8 This is not to say that personal identity is completely private in computer-mediated communication. Certain identifiers attached to e-mail messages often yield clues with regard to one's identity. Also, technical skill can help in learning one's identity (name, address, etcetera).
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH QUESTIONS & METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

Original Research Question & Methodological Approach

The original research question addressed by this study was: How is an electronic mutual aid/self-help (MASH) “community” experienced by its members? Drawing upon the conceptualization of MASH groups as therapeutic learning "communities", this research question was addressed through the application of a naturalistic, qualitative methodological approach. The assumptions underlying the naturalistic approach are distinct from those underlying positivistic, quantitative research methodology (Bryman, 1988; Creswell, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) (see Appendix A for a concise table of the major distinctions). The following brief summary of the distinction between these two paradigms contextualizes the proposed study within the larger framework of approaches to social scientific research.

A naturalistic research paradigm assumes multiple realities and acknowledges the subjectivity of human experience. Thus, qualitative researchers must immerse themselves in the research setting in order to “know” reality from the perspective of those being studied. Qualitative research is interpretive in that it is concerned with elucidating the meaning of subjective experience. The researcher’s role is to interpret how people make sense of and structure their lives and experiences in their natural setting or context. Thus, the qualitative researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis. The interpretive role of the researcher requires that he/she explicate all assumptions and biases regarding the
research at the outset of the research. Finally, *inductive reasoning* is used to form hypotheses, and to develop theory, on the basis of observed relationships between categorical constructs that are grounded in the observations and experiences of those being studied.

In general, the goal of qualitative data analysis is to reduce the data into its conceptual units\(^1\), to group similar concepts together into categorical abstractions, and to systematically relate the subsequent categories to each other according to an explanatory framework or theoretical model that is based on observed relationships grounded in the data. The simultaneous collection and analysis of data aids in the process of discovering common categories and developing theoretical constructs, since working hypotheses explaining relationships among categories can be constantly tested against new data. Through this general process, the researcher interprets and re-constructs the meaning and structure of human experience from qualitative data (e.g. words).

In contrast, quantitative, positivistic research assumes that reality exists independently of observation, that reality is "out there". Based on this assumption, positivistic social researchers assume an *objective* stance towards the social phenomenon under investigation, and often observe the phenomenon under *control* and *experimental* conditions in which certain variables are purposely manipulated and the resultant effects are compared to the control condition. Thus, this approach to social research relies primarily on *causal analyses* of social phenomena in which the researcher does not interpret meaning but uses deductive reasoning to test a
priori hypotheses about the expected behaviour of the phenomenon under observation.

It should be noted that, while the distinction between naturalistic, qualitative research and positivistic, quantitative research is an important one, it should not overshadow the numerous theoretical orientations and traditions within qualitative methodology. While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to review these orientations in detail, suffice it to say that while interpretive in their approach to the study of social phenomena, the various orientations to qualitative research have distinct focal points as a result of their underlying analytical frameworks and philosophical stances (see Patton, 1990, for a review).

Revised Research Question & Research Objectives

The application of naturalistic, qualitative research methodology in a non-traditional, electronic social setting generated a number of difficulties and dilemmas, both methodologically and ethically. These dilemmas required careful consideration as they were encountered, thus complicating and slowing down the process of the research. Furthermore, re-constructing participants' experiences of the list was problematic since conducting interviews via e-mail was a barrier to obtaining in-depth information from respondents regarding their experiences of the list. Despite these problems, the insights generated from these methodological and ethical difficulties were, in and of themselves, worthy of reflection and analysis. As a result, the focus of this thesis was revised to address the process of conducting
naturalistic, qualitative research with participants of computer-mediated social settings. The revised research question that is addressed by this thesis is: *What are the methodological and ethical issues involved in using the Internet to conduct qualitative health research?*

Two research objectives were included to address this revised research question. The first objective speaks directly to the influence of the technology on the research process:

**Objective 1:** To reflect on, and document, the ways in which the electronic mediation influences the process of conducting naturalistic, qualitative research.

This objective subsumed an assessment and analysis of the applicability and feasibility of qualitative research methods (document analysis, interviewing) and conventional ethical protocols for research in electronic social settings. This objective was informed by field notes and reflections regarding the influence of the technology on the process and logistics of implementing the research methodology.

The second research objective addressed the influence of the technology on the social setting:

**Objective 2:** To explore how the technology influenced the electronic MASH group as a social setting for research.

This objective subsumed an assessment of how the technology influenced participants' experiences of computer-mediated support. Although similar to the original research question, this objective represented a more focused exploration of participants' experiences. Specifically, the exploration of participants' experiences was bound by methodological findings regarding the influence of the technology on
the nature of the electronic MASH group as a social setting for research. This "experiential perspective" regarding how the electronic mediation of the group influenced participants' experiences of the MASH group was necessary in order to gain a more complete understanding of the nature of the group as a distinct social reality. In turn, an understanding of the group as a distinct social reality had serious implications for my understanding, as researcher, of the use of qualitative research methodology in electronic, computer-networked social settings.

1 These conceptual units are not inherent to the data, but are actively interpreted by the researcher.
CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Setting

The site of this inquiry was an electronic mailing list accessed via the Internet. Using e-mail as the basis of communication, subscribers to mailing lists send messages to a central e-mail address, maintained by a list administrator or owner. Then, e-mail messages are automatically re-distributed to the mailboxes of all the subscribers to the list. Mailing lists are distinct from other types of forums on the Internet (e.g. UseNet newsgroups, Internet Relay Chat (IRC), Multi-User Domains (MUD)), with each type of forum producing its own norms and social interactions. Also, there is wide variety in the character of electronic forums within any one of these types depending on the group's focus, its structure, as well as other factors.

The group that is of interest to this study is described below under three main headings. First, the structure of the mailing list is described. Then, the individuals who subscribed to, and participated in, the mailing list are described. Last, the types of events that occurred in the mailing list are described. This description is included here in order to provide some background as to the rationale for the choice of this particular mailing list. Also, the following description will help to contextualize the findings of the study as discussed in Chapters Five, Six, and Seven.
Description of the Mailing List "Structure"

The mailing list was started in 1992 by a university professor who was asked to test the newly acquired listproc list-management software on the UNIX system at the university where she worked. At the time, she was trying to quit smoking and, therefore, she decided to start a "support list" for people trying to quit smoking. During the first few days of its operation, the list owner tried to "drum up activity" by sending many posts to the list. However, this was soon unnecessary as subscribers to the list generated their own discussions. At this point, the list owner acted as a "mechanic only" offering technical advice to subscribers as related to subscribing to, and un-subscribing from, the list.

Unlike many other forums available on the Internet, this mailing list was not moderated by the list owner or by another facilitator. That is, there was no person designated to facilitate discussion, direct topics, check postings for obscenities or other inappropriate messages, or to encourage participation (posting) by subscribers. Thus, the list was self-regulated. In keeping with this observation, there were no explicit "rules" or requirements for participation in the list². There were, however, implicit rules that assisted in self-regulation. For example, the status associated with being a long standing member (an "old timer") served to regulate a conflict that occurred in the list during the three-month time period included in the study³.

Mailing List "Rituals": Because there were no explicit rules for participation in the list, the use of rituals helped to create a sense of continuity in the list. For
example, sending "gifts" to individuals on their quit day anniversaries was a ritualistic event on the list undertaken by the "Keeper of the Quit List". Gifts took the form of ASCII art and often signified something of special importance to the recipient. In addition to maintaining a sense of continuity in the list, these rituals rewarded individuals for maintaining their abstinence from smoking and created a friendly climate in the group. An example of the ASCII art is presented in Appendix B. Another example of the use of rituals in the list was the re-posting of some of the e-mail messages that were sent to the mailing list. These messages, referred to as "re-posts", took on special importance in the list since they were posted to the list at regular intervals. An example of a re-post is presented in Appendix C.

Description of Mailing List Subscribers

Ways of Being on the List: Because there were no requirements to actively post messages to the list, individuals subscribing to the list could "lurk" - that is, read but not post mail to the list - for any period of time. Unlike other mailing lists and electronic forums, "lurking" on this list was not seen as a derogatory behaviour. Often, "lurkers" were acknowledged in messages posted to the list, and on one occasion "lurkers" were amicably invited to "de-cloak" themselves by posting one message to the group that said "de-lurking" in the subject line of their e-mail message. Although posting to the list was considered paramount to participation, lurkers still obtained benefits from reading the messages posted to the list.
Different patterns of participation were observed in the mailing list and were identified by respondents in interviews. Some participants began posting as soon as they subscribed to the list, while others started posting to the list only after a period of lurking. Still, others remained "lurkers" and never posted to the list. This variety in patterns of participation has also been observed in other electronic forums (Rheingold, 1993).

**Participant Roles:** Mailing list members took on roles that reflected the length of their membership to the list. Long standing members of the list were considered to be "old timers" whereas individuals in the beginning stages of posting to the list were "newbies". "Newbies" often began their participation in the list by introducing themselves, relating their experiences with quitting smoking, and asking for advice or support from other members of the list. In contrast, "old timers" typically greeted "newbies" to the list and provided them with advice and emotional support.

Some of the "old timers" had specialized, self-designated roles that helped perpetuate the list and create an informal, friendly group climate. For example, one individual designated herself as the "Keeper of the Quit List" by keeping a record of the quit dates of list subscribers who indicated that they wanted their name on the list. This quit list is presented in Appendix D.

**Description of Mailing List Events**

Nearly all the postings in the list focused on information related to quitting smoking. The majority of this information was based on experiential knowledge in
that it was derived from the experiences of the members themselves. However, information originating from professional organizations (e.g. American Cancer Society) was also shared among group members. Primarily, the discussion that centered around quitting smoking focused specifically on how to deal with urges to smoke. The phrase: "The urge to smoke will pass whether you smoke or not" was commonly posted to the group and reflected this emphasis.

While discussion focused primarily on dealing with urges, the group did not advocate any one particular way of quitting smoking, and, in particular, the group did not advocate a 12-step approach to quitting smoking. The ability to "lurk" on the list was built into the experiential knowledge of the group such that "lurkers" were seen as not being ready to commit to the idea of quitting smoking. Consequently, once an individual began to post to the group, they were viewed by group members as committed to quitting smoking and were often encouraged to announce a quit date. In the event that someone did announce a quit date, they were often joined by one or more others who would then act as a quit "buddy".

In addition to the distinction between information derived from professional versus experiential knowledge, subscribers participated in the list in different ways. The following typology of "static" versus "dynamic" participation was developed as a heuristic device to distinguish between two broad forms of participation that were observed on the list.

**Static versus Dynamic Participation:** "Static participation" was reflected by postings that were unidirectional, not conversational in their tone, and lengthy compared to the "dynamic" postings described below. This type of participation was
analogous to pinning up information on a bulletin board in a room full of individuals talking about quitting smoking. While this information was presumably read by mailing list subscribers, it was often not responded to directly in others' e-mail messages. In contrast, “dynamic participation” was exemplified by postings that were more interactive, conversational, and less lengthy compared to “static” postings. This type of participation directly promoted discussion (i.e. members exchanging e-mail) on the list, and was analogous to having a face-to-face conversation with one or more people on a particular topic. The dynamic postings were almost exclusively experientially based, whereas the static participation postings could also reflect information that was more “scientific” or based on professional knowledge.

Rationale for Choice of Research Setting

This particular mailing list was chosen as the research setting for many reasons. First, the list was highly active in that many e-mail messages were posted on a daily basis. Second, the list was well established, having been in operation for more than one year, and included ongoing input from long-standing subscribers (“old timers”), as well as a steady flow of visits from newcomers (“newbies”) to the list. Thus, it was unlikely that the mailing list would “fizzle out” as often happens in many electronically-mediated social networks. Third, from preliminary observations, it appeared as though the list had matured and developed a distinct culture of its own, with its own set of norms and codes of conduct. Fourth, a letter requesting permission to conduct the study had been supported by the list owner. This support
was crucial to gaining entry to the mailing list, and was extremely valuable given the resistance that is often associated with studying face-to-face MASH groups.

Research Participants

The participants in this study were individuals who were subscribed to the mailing list during the period of January 1 to March 31, 1996. At the time of initial contact with the list owner, there were 188 subscribers to the mailing list, although this figure fluctuated on a daily basis as new members subscribed to the list, and as subscribers un-subscribed themselves from the list.

In essence, mailing list subscribers “met” in the “space” provided by the central e-mail address in order to share information, advice, and personal experiences related to quitting smoking. Interaction among mailing list subscribers occurred entirely through typing e-mail messages and posting them to the mailing list address (or through private e-mail). Thus, all “events” in this social setting were comprised of textual interactions, and no physical context was shared among mailing list subscribers\textsuperscript{10}. 

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Gaining Entry

The unique social setting of interest to this study posed special considerations for my gaining entry as a researcher. Gaining entry to the mailing list was accomplished using the following steps:

1. Securing Permission from the Mailing List Owner: My thesis supervisor, Dr. Harvey Skinner, who was a member of the mailing list in question, suggested the possibility of the research project to the list owner whom he had met in person. At that time, the mailing list owner suggested that I contact her directly and provide her with an outline of the study. Following this invitation, I contacted the list owner by telephone and officially asked for her permission to conduct the study. Then, I faxed a cover letter and a detailed outline of the proposed research to her on February 6, 1996 (see Appendix E for a copy of the letter and outline of the research). The list owner indicated her support for the study in an e-mail response to this (see Appendix F).

2. Development and Revision of Ethics Protocol: The Ethics Protocol was submitted to the Ethics Review Committee at the University of Toronto on March 12, 1996. On March 24, 1996, the list owner informed me that the list had dissolved and re-formed into a new mailing list, with a new name, address, and new list owners. At that point, the owner of the original list informed me that an entire record of the e-mail posted to the original mailing list address were stored in an archive on the host computer system and could be retrieved with a simple command using e-mail. Also, she informed me that I could use the e-mail
contained in the archive given that I secured permission from those individuals contributing mail to the list during the time period that I wished to include in the study (January 1 to March 31, 1996). As a result of these changes to the mailing list, an addendum outlining changes in the research design, including data collection procedures and methods of obtaining informed consent, were submitted to the Ethics Review Committee. Ethics approval for the revised research design was received May 7, 1996.

3. Obtaining Permission from Mailing List Subscribers: All individuals who posted e-mail to the mailing list during the time period of January 1 to March 31, 1996 were invited to participate in the study. In order to obtain informed consent from each mailing list subscriber individually, the e-mail archives for the three month period were retrieved from the computer system that hosted the mailing list. Then, using the header information at the beginning of each e-mail message posted to the list, a record was constructed of the e-mail addresses of subscribers to the mailing list during the three month period. Then, each individual was contacted individually by e-mail and invited to take part in the study (see Appendix G for Call for Participants). In the Call for Participants I introduced myself as a researcher interested in learning about subscribers' experiences of the mailing list, and I explained why I was interested in pursuing this area of study. Also, I clearly stated the goals of the research, the ends to which the research findings would be put, the data collection procedures, and the measures that would be taken to protect the anonymity of those who agreed to participate (see Appendix G). The e-mail addresses and telephone numbers of
both myself, and my academic advisor, Dr. Harvey Skinner, were included in the letter so that any questions, concerns and/or feedback regarding the study could be raised by subscribers.

A consent form (see Appendix G) was included in the Call for Participants and was divided into two sections. Section 1 was completed by individuals agreeing to participate in the study and included four sub-sections. In sub-section A participants were asked to type an "X" between a pair of square brackets in order to indicate their consent to take part in the study. Sub-section B outlined the rights of the subscribers as research participants. Sub-section C outlined the responsibilities of the researcher as outlined by the Ethical Electronic Research Guidelines (Schrum, 1995). Sub-section C was included so that any mailing list subscribers who preferred to receive their consent form through regular mail could request this by typing an "X" between a pair of square brackets and then replying and returning the message to me. Sub-section D allowed participants to indicate their desire to receive a summary of the results of the study once completed.

Section 2 of the Consent Form was intended for subscribers who were not interested in participating in the study. Mailing list subscribers indicated their refusal to participate in the study by typing an "X" between a set of square brackets (see Appendix G). Then subscribers returned this refusal message to me using the "reply" function on their e-mail.

Any mailing list subscribers who did not respond to the Call for Participants after 5 days were re-contacted and invited to take part in the study a second time. Any subscribers not responding to the second, re-posted message were contacted a
final, third time to ensure that they received the message. No mailing list subscribers were asked to participate in the study more than three times.

**Researcher as “Instrument”**

In keeping with the original research question, my goal was to interpret the perceptions and meanings of the electronic MASH group through intense analytical engagement with e-mail transcripts obtained through personal documents and online interviews. As the primary instrument for data collection and interpretation, it was essential that I clearly identify the values and assumptions that guided me in choosing to study this particular area, and which guided my methodological approach. Once the research question was re-framed to emphasize the analysis of using qualitative methodology in electronic settings, it was also necessary to reflect on issues that would influence my analysis of the methodological and ethical issues encountered during the research.

My interest in mutual aid/self-help as an area of inquiry was driven by my past experiences with formal and informal groups. Formally, I have been involved with MASH groups and have witnessed the positive effects that these groups have on the everyday lives of individuals. The choice of the conceptual framework of MASH groups as “therapeutic learning communities” is also guided by my personal beliefs and past experiences. I think that the process by which support is communicated among individuals is of paramount importance to the actual content of what is communicated. Also, my interest in mutual support and communities is
guided by my experiences being raised in a small village by my mother who was generally regarded as a community activist and who was an integral figure in the construction of a community center and public library. Often, women would congregate at my house for quilting bees which they would make for the purpose of fundraising through community raffles. In hindsight, it is interesting to think that these quilting sessions acted very much like the more formal mutual aid groups that are common today.

The analysis and insights of this study are influenced by the fact that I am fairly new to the field of qualitative research. Despite a generally good understanding of the underlying conceptual issues, I feel that the process of qualitative research is generally elusive until one has the chance to plan and implement their own research project. As my first qualitative research project, this study was especially difficult since the technology complicated the application of the research methodology. In these ways, this project was particularly challenging.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data regarding participants' experiences of the list were collected using online, semi-structured interviews and personal documents in the form of e-mail messages recorded in the mailing list archives. There were two phases of data collection and analysis. Within each phase, data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously so that observations and interview questions were guided by previous findings that emerged from the data.
Phase One: Recording and Analysis of Personal (E-mail) Documents

All e-mail messages sent to the mailing list during the time period of January to March 31 were retrieved from the host computer system by sending a "GET" command through e-mail. E-mail messages were retrieved in daily digest form such that one document was equivalent to one day's worth of e-mail postings to the mailing list. While three months is a larger time window compared to that used in other studies of computer-networked groups (Beals, 1992; Rice-Lively, 1994), this time period was selected in order to maximize the probability that a wide spectrum of issues relevant to the group would be observed. January 1 was chosen as the beginning cutoff date since many people make New Year's resolutions to quit smoking, thus helping ensure a high level of activity on the mailing list.

Because the group dissolved in March 1996, e-mail digests for the time period of March 16 to March 31 were recorded but were not included in the analysis. This decision was based on observations of decreases in the amount of posts sent to the list during this period of time. Presumably, this was due to technical problems that led to the dissolution of the mailing list and to the formation of a new group. In total, the daily e-mail digests from January 1 to March 15, 1996 yielded approximately 1,000 pages of qualitative data.

All individuals agreeing to participate in the study were given the option of reviewing the e-mail they sent to the list during the three month time period and modifying and/or withdrawing any messages that they did not want included in the analysis. This was included as an option for participants in the case any individuals felt uncomfortable sharing certain e-mail messages with me. Only one individual
who agreed to participate in the study asked to review her e-mail messages. Upon her request, I compiled all the e-mail messages she contributed to the list during the three month time period and e-mailed them to her for review.

Any e-mail messages contributed by individuals who explicitly refused participation in the study were deleted from my record of the mailing list archives. This was performed by searching for the e-mail address of each individual refusing participation and then deleting all e-mail contributed by that person.

**Thematic Analysis of E-mail Documents:** The purpose of the first phase of data collection was to observe and document the day-to-day operation of the mailing list. The e-mail messages contained within the digests were analyzed by assessing and describing typical events and topics of discussion that occurred in the group. This analysis was similar to what Spradley refers to as performing a "domain analysis" which relies on the discovery of semantic relationships (e.g., x is an instance of X) and folk terms in the data that convey meaning about the various events, processes, and actions that are experienced by individuals of a particular culture (Spradley, 1979).

This thematic analysis of the e-mail interactions enabled a clearer understanding of the dimensions of the mailing list "community" and certain elements of their experiences (e.g. "lurking"). Also, the analysis of the e-mail documents helped to formulate probes for the second sessions of the on-line interviews. In this way, my interpretations of the mailing list archives could be tested directly by asking participants in interviews. While the analysis of the e-mail
documents provided insight into the typical events of the list and the structure of the list, they did not provide insight into participants' experiences of the list, and the meaning that the list had for them. Because of this, the interviews were necessary to get a complete picture of participants' experiences. This is discussed further in Chapters Five and Six.

**Phase two: Conducting Semi-Structured Personal Interviews**

*Selecting Interview Respondents:* The second phase of data collection involved conducting semi-structured interviews with eleven of the mailing list subscribers who consented to take part in the study. In the consent form, individuals were informed that, if they agreed to participate in the study, they may be re-contacted and invited to take part in an on-line interview which they could either accept or decline.

Interview candidates were selected to reflect variety in how subscribers participated in the mailing list. In order to select candidates for interviews, the e-mail digests collected in phase one of the study were used to construct brief participant profiles on each mailing list subscriber who participated in the study. The information included in the profiles reflected how often the subscriber posted to the list and the length of membership ("newbie" vs. "old timer"). Also, notes were made regarding distinguishing features in terms of how each subscriber participated in the list. For instance one member's primary way of participating in the list was to maintain a list of "birthdays" (i.e. quit days) for members of the list, and to send other members ASCII art as "gifts" for maintaining abstinence from cigarettes on
their anniversaries. In total, fourteen subscribers were contacted for participation in interviews of which eleven accepted (three individuals did not respond to the invitation to participate). The invitation to participate in an on-line interview is presented in Appendix H.

**Descriptive Summary of Interview Respondents:** Five males and six females participated in on-line interviews, and ages ranged from 34 to 53 years. The occupations of interview respondents were diverse, including college/university students, teachers or university professors, independent consultants/entrepreneurs, computer technician, tradesmiths, and production workers. All but one of the interview respondents posted to the list from their homes and learned about the mailing list from a source on the Internet. All but three of the respondents had attended a face-to-face support or mutual aid group previous to their involvement with the mailing list. The three respondents with no prior involvement in face-to-face support or mutual aid groups were male.

**The Interview Process:** All interviews were conducted through private e-mail and focused on gaining insight into participants’ experiences as members of the on-line MASH group. All but one of the electronic interviews were conducted in two sessions (one respondent never returned a second set of responses). In the first session, the questions were sent to the respondent and s/he was encouraged to respond to write as much as s/he wanted. If respondents did not reply with their
responses after one week, they were sent a polite reminder to do so at their earliest convenience.

In the first session, respondents were asked to respond to a range of topics in an open-ended questionnaire since it was anticipated that respondents would become impatient with a traditional, sequential format process of asking questions "one-at-a-time". This questionnaire is presented in Appendix I. The questionnaire was initially sent to four respondents, and was then sent to seven other interview respondents. In the second interview session, probes were used to explore further areas identified by respondents in the first session of the interview. A sample probe used in the second interview session is presented in Appendix J.

While the researcher was not able to interact face-to-face with the respondent, this method of interviewing allowed respondents to reflect at length on questions, and to answer at a time that was convenient. At the outset of the study, it was anticipated that the electronic medium would not be a barrier to data collection or effective communication since respondents were well accustomed to communication via e-mail. However, the meaning of participants’ responses were not always clear. This is discussed further in Chapter Five.

**The Interview Guide:** The interview guide was used in the first session of the interview to obtain further insight into participants’ experiences of the mailing list. The guide included thirteen questions presented in seven sections (see Appendix I). Section 1 collected descriptive information from respondents, including their age, gender, and occupation, and assessed how respondents found out about the
mailing list, the location from where they accessed the list, and whether they had had previous involvement in a face-to-face MASH group. Section 2 included questions focused on the quality and quantity of their involvement in the list. Section 3 explored participants’ experiences of the list by asking them about the benefits and drawbacks associated with being on the list, how the list assisted them in quitting smoking, and any feelings that they associated with being on the list. Section 4 asked participants to compare their experiences of the mailing list with their experiences in face-to-face MASH groups (or with another type of face-to-face group if they had never belonged to a traditional MASH group). Sub-sections were included to help stimulate thought and reflection around many areas. Section 5 asked participants to compare their experiences on the list with their experiences in other computer-mediated groups, support or otherwise. Section 6 asked respondents to elaborate on any other issues that they thought were important regarding their experiences of the list. Finally, Section 7 asked respondents to evaluate the question guide itself.

**Analysis of On-line Interviews:** The purpose of the interviews was to gain insight into participants' experiences of their involvement in the mailing list. To start, a coding template was constructed that reflected the questions included in the initial interview guide. Then, participants' responses to each question were coded under the appropriate category. For example, participants' responses to the question of the benefits of being on the list were coded under a category called "Benefits". The responses for each category were then printed and summarized in
a chart in order to get a sense of the strength of themes that emerged within and across categories. As interview transcripts were reviewed, new categories were also generated to capture themes that emerged in interview responses. For instance, the theme of "timing" was generated from interview responses in which participants described the benefit of being able to access the group when they needed it. Similarly, a category for "lurking" was developed to include all references to "lurking" by interview participants. Because the focus of the thesis was revised to address the methodological and ethical aspects of the research, only those categories that related to the methodological and ethical insights were elaborated and are reported in the following chapters. In this way, observations recorded in the field notes (especially those regarding the "fluidity" of the list) guided the analysis and reporting of participants' experiences.

A return to the mailing list archives added to the categories that emerged in interviews. For example, a search on the derivatives of the word "lurk" was used in the mailing list archives to investigate how "lurking" was addressed and talked about in the context of the mailing list. Then, appropriate bits of text from the mailing list archives were coded in the "lurking" category. In this way, information from the mailing list archives was combined with the information obtained in interview responses.

In order to check my interpretations of the interview data, a summary of the interview responses was sent to all interview respondents for review and feedback and to check trustworthiness of interpretations. However, no responses were received.
Data Management

All data contributed by participants were in the form of typed e-mail messages. Thus, no transcription of participants' words was necessary. Seventy-three transcripts of daily e-mail digests collected from the mailing list archive (January 1 up to and including March 15 minus January 2 and January 16) and twenty-one interview transcripts (eleven interviews X 2 sessions / interview minus one incomplete second session) were saved in ASCII format and entered into the NUD*IST qualitative data analysis software (NUDIST, Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing) (Richards & Richards, 1991; Richards & Richards, 1995). This software helps researchers in the process of searching qualitative data, exploring and linking ideas about what the data means, and testing theories about the data. By storing text files separately from index files, NUDIST allows for a more complex indexing system relative to other qualitative analysis software. This, in turn, allows for a more powerful and efficient ability to test hypothetical relationships between concepts and categories.

In order to protect participants' identities, all identifying elements were removed from the e-mail messages prior to entering them into the NUD*IST program. Removal of any e-mail addresses or mailing list addresses was facilitated by using a computer-assisted search for the "@". However, other identifying elements removed from transcripts included organizations or groups of affiliation, affiliated World Wide Web sites, telephone numbers and street addresses. Any identifying elements that were overlooked prior to entry into the NUD*IST program were blackened with a marker after they were in printed form.
Analysis and Summary of Research Methodology and Ethics

Impressions that I had regarding the implementation of qualitative research methodology in the computer-networked "environment" were noted in a methodology journal. These notes were compiled in a table organized according to the stage of research in which each observation was made. The field notes were written up more formally and are summarized in Chapter Five. Then, these notes were used in conjunction with the interview responses and archived e-mail documents in addressing the objectives of the study.

As the focus of the thesis became more methodological in nature, the notes took on more importance in terms of guiding the analysis. In particular, observations in the notes regarding the "fluidity" of the mailing list as a social setting were used to guide the analysis of participants' experiences as indicated in interviews. Chapter Five presents a summary of these reflections.

1 For instance, while newsgroups and mailing lists both operate in "non-real time", participating in a newsgroup is akin to having a discussion with a group of people you may or may not know in a football field, whereas participating in a mailing list is more similar to having a discussion with a group of people you may or may not know in a separate room with a door. Using this analogy, one has to open the door by subscribing to the mailing list. As a result of these differences, and perhaps others as well, the general character of newsgroups and mailing lists is quite different. For example, mailing lists are typically much more insulated against commercial postings, whereas these are common in newsgroups. Unlike mailing lists and newsgroups, both IRC and MUDs operate in "real-time" (see Newby, 1994, for a thorough review of the norms associated with each communication platform).

2 The lack of explicit rules was clearly acknowledged in some cases. For example, in response to a new member's request for information as to how to participate on the list, an old timer replied:

There is no real protocol. Just pretend that you are writing a letter to friend (or a bunch of 'em). Just write whenever you feel like it, and send it to the xxxx address.

3 Implicit rules were most obvious when they were broken and assisted in list regulation. A good example of this is provided by a posting of a newly subscribed member who expressed his discontent with the sexist nature of the jokes that were posted regularly by a long standing member of the list. Despite the validity of his claims, he was chastised by other group members as not having a sense of humour and eventually he stopped posting messages to the list (it is unclear whether he stopped posting or actually un-subscribed from the list). It is unknown whether this conflict was, in part,
resolved through private e-mail. However, the point to be made here is that the jokes were judged by the group as appropriate material, primarily because the sender of the jokes was a long standing member of the list. Had a newly subscribed member to the list posted such material, it is questionable whether this would have been seen as appropriate behaviour. Thus, in the absence of explicit rules for participation, the length of one's membership to the list provided some status in the group which provided a mechanism for regulation of the list.

The benefits of "lurking" were sometimes acknowledged by the lurkers themselves. The following excerpt provides an example of this:

Hi all! Just so you don't get a complex— I have been lurking for a month and don't feel like I have to unsubscribe. I feel more capable every day for my quit date. AND I thank you all for that. I'll let you all know when.

Thanks, Marge.

Often, people posting to the group who touted 12 step philosophies were ignored (i.e. not responded to).

This is analogous to the contemplation stage of readiness for change as described by Prochaska, DiClemente and Norcross (Prochaska, DiClemente, & Norcross, 1992).

However, this was not always the case, for sometimes the personal story or experience of an individual was kept by a subscriber and re-posted to the list at a later date.

Surprisingly, the mailing list did fizzle out prior to data collection and analysis and influenced the research design and focus of the thesis. This is described further in Chapter Five.

The implicit nature of the "rules" and "codes of conduct" became more clear only after a more in-depth observation of the mailing list archives.

The majority of subscribers to this mailing list did not ever meet face-to-face, although a few did. One such meeting resulted in marriage. This subscriber was not included as an interview respondent.

Due to technical problems, there were no digests available for January 2 or January 16.
CHAPTER FIVE: METHODOLOGICAL AND ETHICAL FINDINGS

Introduction

A number of methodological and ethical problems and dilemmas were encountered at various "stages" of the project that were related to the use of the Internet to mediate the inquiry. This chapter presents the methodological and ethical insights made during each stage of the project as recorded in field notes. In the discussion that follows, the methodological findings are presented in conjunction with findings that bear more directly on the ethical issues that emerged during the research. Primarily, this was done to facilitate a stage-by-stage description of the methodological and ethical issues. However, this organization is also instructive because of the inextricable relationship between the methodological and the ethical aspects of social research. In particular, this is true of naturalistic, qualitative research (Lincoln, 1995). Where appropriate, participants' perceptions are used to help illustrate the researchers' reflections on the research process.

Developing the Research Proposal

After the first research proposal was written, the ephemeral nature of the group's boundaries was observed when the list suddenly dissolved and re-formed into a new mailing list with a new list owner. As a result of this, a revised research proposal was prepared, incorporating a retrospective research design. In this way, the research design emerged in response to special considerations of the research
setting. This revised research design, however, had implications for subsequent stages of the research. These implications are discussed in the sections that follow.

Bounding the Study

The social setting was an on-line support group for individuals who wanted to quit or cut down smoking. Individuals subscribing to this mailing list posted messages to a central e-mail address where messages were then re-distributed to all other subscribers to the list. To exchange information with other subscribers, members could either post their messages to the mailing list address, or they could send messages directly to other members using private e-mail addresses.

The networking technology bounded the study in many ways. First, the study was bound by the technology in that only public e-mail messages were visible and accessible to the researcher. Logistically, it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to obtain private e-mail correspondence. Thus, no private e-mail exchanges were included in the analysis. However, many people formed friendships through their involvement in the mailing list and corresponded privately with particular individuals. In some cases, private correspondence continued after the mailing list dissolved.

Had inclusion of the private e-mail been possible, it would have been worthwhile to see how private e-mail exchanges compared with the public postings to the mailing list. There were some indications from interview respondents of differences between correspondence through public and private e-mail. For
example, one respondent noted that conflicts were often negotiated through private e-mail whereas public mail was more “polite”.

The study of this electronic social setting was also influenced by the technology in that only individuals who actually posted to the list were identified as subscribers and invited to participate in the study. Thus, any individual who subscribed to the list during the time period in question but who did not actually post to the list during that time (i.e. a “lurker”) could not be identified for participation in the study. This had direct implications for theoretical sampling as it became clear that the ability to “lurk” was seen as a benefit of membership of the electronic MASH group.

The technology facilitated bounding the study within a time context. That is, the recorded e-mail digests made a retrospective analysis possible that included all the text-based interactions sent to the mailing list during a finite period of time (January 1 to March 15, 1996). However, it was difficult to know from the outset what time span would give a sense of the spectrum of issues that were relevant to the mailing list. Although a time period of three months was decided upon as a reasonable “window” of time through which to observe the mailing list, this length of time was chosen arbitrarily. The arbitrary quality was highlighted during interviews when it became more clear that the group was especially sensitive to the influence of particular individuals in shaping the nature of the group (e.g. goals, content, general direction, etc.). One respondent summed this up nicely when she said that the list just “morphed into whatever people were on it at the time”.
Also, the breakdown of the mailing list coincided with the end of the time period chosen for the study. Thus, the observed interactions (especially those in March 1996) were influenced by the technical difficulties that resulted in the eventual breakdown of the mailing list.

Mailing List Dissolution: Implications for Research Design & Analytical Approach:

The ephemeral nature of the group's boundaries was exemplified when the mailing list under investigation dissolved and re-formed into a new group with a new list owner prior to data collection. This had serious implications for the data collection process and the research design in general. More specifically, the research design was revised from a concurrent recording and analysis of e-mail postings sent to the list, to a retrospective analysis of the e-mail posted to the mailing list during a three month period.

The revised research design resulted in both benefits and drawbacks for the subsequent tasks related to data collection and analysis. These implications are mentioned briefly here and are discussed more thoroughly in later sections of this chapter. The most notable benefit of the revised design was that I was able to observe the entire record of the interactions on the mailing list without disturbing group process. That is, the retrospective direction of the analysis effectively avoided any disruption to the group process that would have resulted from participants' reactions to being studied and "watched". A second noteworthy benefit was that the process of collecting the e-mail documents was greatly facilitated since
the e-mail documents could be easily downloaded by sending a simple command to
the host computer system via e-mail.

In terms of drawbacks, while the retrospective analysis allowed for an
assessment of the typical kinds of messages and information posted to the list (see
Chapter Four), the retrospective design meant that I could not get a feel for the daily
dynamism of the list by reading the mail on a day-to-day basis. The relevance of
this as a methodological issue became clear as the relationship between
participants' experiences of the list and aspects of the timing of receiving support
emerged from analysis of the interview data (see Chapter Six for a fuller explication
of participants' experiences).

The retrospective design also had implications for the ethics of the research.
This is discussed further in the later section of this chapter entitled Contacting
Potential Participants (see page 55).

**Gaining Entry**

**Blurring of Public and Private Domains**

The consideration of whether a social setting is public or private is important
in terms of designing one's approach to gaining entry. In the current study, the
disagreement between what was considered to be in "public" and "private" domains
was evident as I negotiated entry to the social setting. The mailing list was public in
one sense in that anyone could subscribe to the list by sending a specific e-mail
message to the list processor. The only prerequisite for gaining membership to this
electronic MASH group was that one had to physically subscribe to the list (although presumably one would also have the desire to give and/or receive support for quitting smoking). In this sense, the mailing list was accessible, "open", and in the public domain.

However, while it is generally regarded that information on the Internet is for public access, electronic discussion groups (on-line support groups, for example) often develop their own culture and value system. As a result, participants in these groups often view their interchanges as occurring within a private "place". My observations of the mailing list archives showed that there was a general level of familiarity among many of the group members. Specifically, there was a general awareness of whom members were likely to "encounter" on the list (i.e. receive messages from), and thus to whom they were broadcasting their own messages. Members often addressed the messages that they posted to the list to particular individuals (often in the form of replies). Also, awareness of "silences" was observed in cases where subscribers would broadcast messages asking another individual if they were still "there".

Despite the awareness of others subscribing to the mailing list, the participants of the MASH group expected, and accepted, "lurking" behaviour for the purpose of reading information on quitting smoking (see Chapter Four for a discussion of "lurking"). However, the propriety of "lurking" on the list for the purposes of gathering data for research is highly questionable. Respecting the privacy of individuals subscribing to computer-networked groups that act as support groups is especially important for the discussion in such groups often includes talk
about personal failures and weaknesses and potential sources of embarrassment and/or harm. Furthermore, the non-visual qualities of on-line groups as compared to their face-to-face counterparts may hold special appeal for certain individuals, and any perceived threats to their anonymity may interfere with the therapeutic process. In extreme cases, information about a participant’s identity may lead to possible discrimination in their workplace or in other milieux. In the present study, one interview respondent asked that I not include a subject line alluding to the study or interview in my e-mail correspondence with her because she did not want her co-workers or clients to know of her smoking or of her participation in an on-line support group.

The approach taken to gain entry to the social setting in the present study was formulated carefully and with conscious consideration of this public/private dilemma. That is, the right to obtain information about the social setting was not assumed on the basis of accessibility and/or legal definition. Although there are few references to guide ethical qualitative research in electronic settings, Lynne Schrum has provided detailed recommendations to guide the ethical conduct of researchers (Schrum, 1995). These principles were applied in the present study and were included in the consent form to inform participants of my roles and responsibilities as researcher (see Appendix G). The development of the consent form is described in further detail in the following section.
Obtaining Informed Consent

Development of Consent Form: Special Considerations: The consent form used in this study was developed as a result of a series of revisions and feedback from the thesis committee and colleagues. In order to optimize the number of responses I received, it was necessary to design a consent form that was both transmittable and understandable through e-mail. Also, it was necessary to design the form so that respondents could clearly communicate whether they agreed or refused to participate in the study. In order to achieve this, subscribers were asked to indicate their consent or their refusal to participate in the study by typing an "X" in between one of two pairs of square parentheses. In this way, both refusal and consent to participate were explicit and a lack of response was not automatically interpreted as a sign of refusal (i.e. lack of response could reflect not reading or receiving the message). As it turned out, this was an important consideration given that the second and third call for participants resulted in a number of additional individuals both consenting (15) and refusing (13) participation in the study. The consent form is presented in Appendix G.

Contacting Potential Participants: In the original design I had intended to request participation publicly on the mailing list with the support of the original list owner, and then to concurrently record the e-mail posted to the list from those who agreed to participate in the study. However, once the list dissolved, the mailing list archives were downloaded with the permission of the list owner, and then each
participant within the three-month time window (January 1 to March 31, 1996) was contacted and was invited through private e-mail to participate in the study.

Although I had permission from the original list owner to download the e-mail archives from the host computer and to use this information with permission from the appropriate individuals, the process of obtaining archives and then requesting consent was, in retrospect, perhaps questionable from an ethical perspective. Primarily, this was because the process of requesting permission from mailing list members through private e-mail involved: i) physically reading the archived postings and identifying and recording the e-mail addresses of all the individuals who posted to the mailing list during the three-month time period, and ii) making unsolicited e-mail contact with individuals to invite their participation in the study.

The retrospective identification of participants had positive ethical implications as well. The recruitment of participants through the use of a retrospective research design meant that I did not have to join the group as a participant observer on the mailing list while it was still active. Thus, although unintended, the revised research design was beneficial since it facilitated the process of data collection and did not disrupt the group process. The latter point is especially important in the context of mutual aid groups as participants in such groups may feel hesitant about participating if they know there is a researcher observing their interactions. In turn, this may disrupt the therapeutic process.
Response Rates to Call for Participants

During the time period of January 1 to March 31, 1996, 160 individuals posted to the mailing list. Of the total sample, 20 individuals could not be reached due to technical difficulties with e-mail delivery (e.g. change of e-mail address). Thus, the total reachable sample was 140. Of the 140 subscribers who could be reached through e-mail, 37 (26%) replied to the first call for participants. Of these individuals, 26 (70%) agreed to participate in the study, and 11 (30%) refused participation. Of the 103 individuals who did not reply to first call for participants, 14 (14%) replied to the second call for participants. Of the 14 who replied to the second call for participants, 9 (64%) agreed to participate in the study, and 5 (36%) refused participation. Fourteen of the remaining 89 individuals responded to the third and final call for participants, of which 6 consented to the study (43%) and 8 refused participated (57%). In total, of the entire reachable sample of 140, 65 responded to the call for participants, reflecting a response rate of 46%. Of those, 41 agreed to participate in the study (29% of sample) and 24 refused participation in the study (17% of sample). A summary of response rates is displayed graphically in Figure 1.
Reactions to Call for Participants: In general, reactions to the invitation to participate in the present study were varied. Many respondents voiced their enthusiasm and approval of the study, sometimes noting that the positive experiences that their participation in the list had on their quitting smoking made the study a worthwhile investigation. However, others felt that the study was an invasion of their privacy (see following section on Reasons for Refusing Participation). The majority of the subscribers, however, did not respond to the invitation to take part in the study (see Figure 1).

It is difficult, if not impossible, to determine the reasons for not responding to the call for participants. However, some speculation is worthwhile for this is an inevitable issue in recruiting participants from computer-mediated groups. In part, not responding to the call for participants may have been a result of not receiving the original message inviting participation in the study. This could have been due to
either technical failure or absence from the computer that one used for e-mail correspondence. The former is unlikely given that the message was sent to each individual a total of three times. Given the length of the Call for Participants posting (approximately four pages), individuals may have deleted it automatically without reading it. Also, they may have chosen to not respond because they were unable to invest the time that would inevitably be involved with participation in the study. Finally, by choosing not to respond, subscribers may have thought that they were implicitly indicating refusal to take part in the study (see following section on Reasons for Refusing Participation).

Reasons for Refusing Participation

Although most of the individuals who explicitly refused participation in the study did not provide reasons for doing so, some indicated that time constraints were their primary reason for not participating. More importantly, some of the subscribers indicated that concern over privacy issues (both personal and group privacy) was the primary reason for refusing participation. For example, the propriety of using the technology to make unsolicited contacts with individuals was questioned. One individual in particular expressed that the unsolicited nature of my contacting him by e-mail was a violation of his privacy, and he wrote in detail on his views of how personal privacy was being increasingly threatened as communication media saturate society (e.g. mail, fax, e-mail, phone, door bell) and as unsolicited intrusions become more socially acceptable. In a similar vein, others indicated that
their lack of response to my first call for participants should have clearly communicated that they refused participation, and that my re-contacting them a second and third time to request their participation in the study was unwarranted and unacceptable.

Other subscribers focused their concerns more on the influence of the research process on group privacy and group process. In particular, the propriety of my downloading the mailing list archives without prior knowledge of the mailing list members, and using these archives as a database for the study, was questioned as this could potentially lead to subscribers feeling less "safe" to share their feelings and experiences in other electronic MASH groups. In a similar vein, one individual simply stated that she simply did not feel like having her words "dissected" for the sake of research.

Data Collection and Analysis

I. Collection and Revision of E-mail Documents

The collection of the e-mail documents was greatly facilitated by the technology in that each day’s digests for the time period in question were simply downloaded (i.e. saved to a disk copy) over the Internet. However, the revisions that were necessary for the entry of these documents into the NUD*IST data management program were extremely time-consuming. The revisions made to the e-mail documents are discussed further in the following section, and in a later section on the use of NUD*IST program with e-mail documents.
Preparing the Data: Editing E-mail Documents: Prior to entering the data into the NUD*IST program, all e-mail messages were edited to protect participants' identities and the identity of the mailing list. It was anticipated that the majority of editing would occur in the headers of the mailing list which usually include the sender's e-mail address as well as the mailing list address. However, identifying elements also occurred regularly in subscribers' signature files and in other sections of the text. These identifying elements included individuals' names, e-mail addresses, organizations of affiliation, the mailing list name, mailing list address, telephone numbers, street addresses, and affiliated World Wide Web sites. Also, while editing the e-mail address information in the message headers was facilitated by searching for the "@" symbol, identifying elements included in individuals' signature files often did not include any common elements. Thus, editing the documents in order to protect participants' identities meant manually going through the documents, and was consequently a more time-consuming task than originally expected.

The e-mail documents were also edited by removing the e-mail messages of those individuals who explicitly refused to participate in the study. The permanent nature of e-mail complicated the process of deleting the postings of individuals refusing participation. This was because the original messages of those individuals refusing participation were often embedded in the responses of other subscribers who used the "reply" function on their e-mail software to send their own messages or responses to the list. In response to this unanticipated issue, a check was performed to ensure that all e-mail messages posted by individuals who refused
participation were deleted from the data set. Again, this deletion from others’ e-mail postings was facilitated by searching for the e-mail address of the individuals refusing participation in the study.

The deleted e-mail postings of those refusing participation in the study left “gaps” in the archives and, as a consequence, had implications for data analysis and for observing the flow of discussion on the list. However, because the flow of discussion in non real-time electronic groups is characterized by a staggered quality, it is difficult to assess to what extent these “gaps” in the data set influenced or interfered with the later analysis. (See Chapter Six for a further discussion of the staggered nature of communication in the list).

“Non-Responders”: Implied Consent or Implied Dissent?: An unanticipated issue also presented itself in the consideration of how to manage the archived data contributed by individuals who did not respond to the call for participants (“non-responders”). This was an extremely important issue given that a substantial proportion of the data was contributed by “non-responders”. There were no formal guidelines to guide a decision on this matter. After much thought and consultation with the thesis committee, it was decided that the data contributed by “non-responders” would be left in the data set with the stipulation that any data provided by these individuals would not be quoted verbatim in any reports based on the research. Primarily, this decision was made in order to optimize the flow of the mailing list discussions. That is, removing all the “non-responders” postings would have left gaps in the data set so large that the analysis could have been seriously
compromised, leaving little context within which to analyze the postings contributed by those who agreed to the study. Furthermore, from a logistic standpoint, removing all the e-mail postings of non-responders would have been an extremely time-consuming task and would have further delayed analysis.

Participant Modification of E-mail Documents: All individuals agreeing to participate in the study were given the option of reviewing the e-mail they sent to the list during the three month time period and modifying and/or withdrawing any messages that they did not want included in the analysis. Of the 41 individuals consenting to the present study, only one individual asked to see what she had posted to the list during the three month time period. While feeding back this participant’s e-mail was a manageable task for the researcher, compiling and distributing e-mail postings to all the original authors could have proven an extremely onerous task had more participants requested to review their e-mail. This would have also proved an onerous task for respondents depending on the number of e-mail messages they posted to the list originally.

It is likely that more individuals would have requested to review their mail had the list focused on a more sensitive topic (e.g. AIDS, alcoholism). At the same time, researchers should ensure participants of groups that focus on sensitive topics these types of concessions as a way of establishing rapport with participants, and to effectively minimize any potential harm that individuals may experience as a result of participating in research.
Analytical Approach to E-mail Documents: The nature of the documents complicated the approach to analysis. That is, the qualitative analysis of the archived e-mail messages presented special problems since e-mail is simultaneously comparable to both informal talk (due to its instantaneous nature) and like prepared, written discourse (due to its reliance on type and lack of visual information) (Rheingold, 1993). Also, because I had access to the entirety of the social interactions that occurred between members of the mailing list (excluding private e-mail), the document analysis acted as a form of observational data gathering. However, the unspoken cues normally conveyed by facial expression, eye contact, and body language in observational techniques of data gathering were excluded from analysis. In addition, the lack of a physical context for analyzing social interaction complicated traditional observational approaches applied in face-to-face settings. The ways in which the technology re-framed the analytical approach are discussed more thoroughly in Chapter Six.

II. Conducting and Analyzing Interviews

The electronic medium had serious implications for conducting interviews and for analyzing interview data. In comparison to conventional, face-to-face interviewing techniques (e.g. pausing, probing, etc.), the asynchronous and staggered nature of e-mail directly influenced the process of conducting interviews on-line via e-mail. Instead of a question-answer format commonly used in face-to-face scenarios, a list of topics and open-ended questions was sent to interview
respondents who were encouraged to write as much as they saw fit in their responses. This method was used to reduce the "choppiness" that would be associated with sending one question at a time, and to reduce respondent impatience with the overall interview process. Also, because typing is more time-consuming than verbal conversation, responses were likely to be shorter in comparison to face-to-face interviews.

**Selecting Interview Respondents:** Because interview respondents were chosen from the recorded e-mail archives, obtaining a range of experiences was problematic given that true "lurkers" (i.e. individuals subscribing to the list but never actually posting to the list) could not be identified. However, a few individuals who posted to the list only once or twice, yet who considered themselves to be "lurkers", agreed to being interview respondents and contributed their experiences of the list. These individuals tended to be those yielding the least information in their interview responses. Some information about the experience of "lurkers" was also obtained indirectly by asking "posters" how their experiences of the list changed as they moved from "lurking" to posting actively on the list.

**The Interview Process:** Interview respondents typically returned their responses to the first and second set of questions within a few (two to three) days. However, some respondents did not return their responses for at least one week. With respect to the process of conducting the on-line interview, e-mail does not allow for probing an individual’s responses in the same way as face-to-face
interviews. In particular, communication via e-mail reduced the level of spontaneity that was possible in asking questions (i.e. in pursuing an unintended or unforeseen line of questioning). Related to this, I did not have access to the insights that usually can be obtained in face-to-face interviews from respondents' spontaneous expressions and slips of the tongue. Also, it was less likely that respondents would pursue seemingly unrelated lines of thinking (i.e. "go off on tangents"). In part, this may have been due to the more laborious nature of typing as compared to verbal speech.

The lack of spontaneity in respondents' responses may have also been influenced by the way in which the questions were transmitted, possibly forcing respondents to organize their experiences according to the questions that were asked, and/or according to the ways in which the questions were structured and presented (see Interview Guide - Session One, Appendix I). For example, one question in particular asked respondents to reflect on the differences and similarities between their involvement with electronic and face-to-face groups. This question included many sub-sections corresponding to the various activities and processes that are known to occur in face-to-face groups (see Interview Guide - Session One, Appendix I). Respondents tended not to frame their answers according to each sub-section, however. More often, they tended to write one or two paragraphs at the bottom of the sub-sections listed in the question guide. It was not clear whether the categories of sub-headings were not meaningful or if the question was too complicated in the way that it was presented.
Not being able to probe on the spot also made it more difficult to elicit the meanings that participants attributed to conceptually loaded terms. For example, one respondent indicated that he expected “moral support” when he subscribed to the mailing list, yet offered no further information that would indicate what “moral support” meant to him. Similarly, at times it was difficult as a researcher to convey and clarify the meaning of the questions in type. For example, when asked what influenced their decision to subscribe to the mailing list, many participants provided the literal response that they “wanted to quit smoking”. However, the intended purpose of this question was to elicit ideas from respondents as to why they chose to subscribe to an electronic MASH group as opposed to a face-to-face group. Thus, the inability to probe on the spot did not allow for the researcher to clarify and/or reword questions according to participants’ responses.

**Nature of Interview Transcripts:** The interview transcripts themselves were also influenced by the medium of communication. At the outset of the study, conducting the interviews via e-mail was viewed as possibly producing a more accurate transcript since the intervening stage of transcription, normally required in face-to-face interviews, was not necessary. Thus, there were no “biases” normally associated with the process of transcription of face-to-face interviews (Poland, 1995). However, conducting the interviews on-line via e-mail did not necessarily translate into a more easily understood transcript. At times, statements made by respondents were very ambiguous and were not contextualized by an in-depth response. Furthermore, “on-the-spot” clarification was not possible. For example,
in comparing face-to-face and electronic MASH groups in terms of support giving and receiving one respondent typed "I received more" yet it was not clear to which type of group she was referring.

**Length & Depth of Interview Responses:** There was some variation in the length of interview responses received from interview respondents. Some respondents clearly reflected on the questions and provided answers that were detailed and clearly thought out. In contrast, others responded in point form. In general, responses to interview questions were brief - most responses were approximately five pages in length (including the original questions). This is much shorter than a face-to-face interview transcript which can be upwards of 20 pages (although this too fluctuates with interview length, format, interviewer, etc.). The shorter responses observed in the present study were likely a result of a number of a number of factors. First, typing is a more laborious task as compared to verbal speech. Second, the inability to probe on the spot meant that it was not possible for the interviewer to facilitate deeper reflection in certain areas. Third, because the questions were transmitted all at once, it was less likely that respondents would take on new or different directions in terms of describing their experiences.

**Respondents' Perceptions of Interview Questions:** A question was included at the end of the interview guide asking respondents to evaluate the questions they were asked in the first session of the interview (see Interview Guide - Session One Appendix I). For the most part, evaluations were positive. There were some general
misconceptions about the nature of the research that are noteworthy though. Despite my having explained thoroughly the nature of the research, many respondents equated the study with a “survey”. One interview respondent in particular commented that he did not know how I would “glean any useful statistical information using this format”. This feedback from participants highlighted two major points. First, it is important that qualitative researchers clearly spell out the goal, nature and methods of their work. Secondly, given that I explained the nature of the research at some length in my initial letter to participants, the extent to which some people engage in thorough reading of their e-mail is questionable.

**Developing and Verifying Hypotheses**

The majority of the findings regarding the experiences of participants of the electronic MASH group was drawn from data provided by individuals who posted regularly to the list. In turn, this limited analysis of the range of participants' experiences of the electronic MASH group. Particularly, although hypotheses could be generated about the differences between the experiences of regular “posters” and “lurkers”, the verification of hypotheses was problematic due to a lack of data from individuals who were “lurkers” on the list.

Verifying findings from interviews was attempted through a checking back procedure (see Chapter Four). It was hoped that, by sending out a summary of findings from the interview responses, respondents would clarify any of my misinterpretations of their experiences as subscribers to the mailing list. However,
no responses to the summary were received. In part, this was likely due to the time lapse from the beginning of the study (approximately one year). In addition, because the group was no longer functioning, the interview respondents may not have had as much of an interest in continuing to participate in the study.

Computer-Assisted Data Management & Analysis: Reflections on Using NUD*IST with E-mail Documents

The use of the NUD*IST software (NonNumerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching & Theorizing) to manage the qualitative e-mail data posed special problems for data preparation and management. In e-mail, the use of asterisks and other non-alphabetic symbols are often used to denote emphasis on certain words or to convey emotion or to enhance design quality. These symbols, however, interfere with the way in which the NUD*IST program reads textual data. Because the NUD*IST program interprets asterisks as the beginning of a new section in a document, these symbols must be removed prior to entering the data into NUD*IST in order to avoid later complications. In the present study, this was not done because the asterisks and other symbols were often used in postings containing sophisticated ASCII art that was frequently sent to members of the group as “gifts” for maintaining abstinence from cigarettes. Therefore, the removal of these symbols would have left gaps in the data and would have had implications for the analysis of the e-mail postings by altering the friendly group climate encouraged by these types of postings.
There were also instances in which asterisks were used by subscribers to help organize large amounts of text that they posted to the list. For example, one member contributed a large posting, originally posted to another newsgroup on quitting smoking, that originated from CancerNet, the National Cancer Institute, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (NIH Publication No. 94-1647). In translating the text to its electronic form, one section was separated point by point by asterisks (the font has been changed to 10 point to accommodate the original format):

Preparing Yourself for Quitting:

* Decide positively that you want to quit. Try to avoid negative thoughts about how difficult it might be.

* List all the reasons you want to quit. Every night before going to bed,
  repeat one of those reasons 10 times.

The above excerpt also illustrates problems with line length that were experienced during the project. Although the line was used as the text unit of analysis, at times one text unit exceeded one line length (see above).

The relative permanence of e-mail documents had implications for using NUD*IST to facilitate text searching. In mailing lists, it is common to use the “reply” function of one’s e-mail software to respond to messages posted by others. Often, the original message is copied into the reply (this is typically a default setting in e-
mail programs), thus preserving continuity in the discussion. This created problems for computer-assisted text searching because searching for a unit of text (e.g. "lurk") often identified identical instances of text as if they were new occurrences.

**Reporting & Disseminating Findings**

Currently, there are few, if any, guidelines on how to report and disseminate findings of research based on computer-networked data and e-mail documents. For instance, in the present study, it was unclear as to what identifying information (e.g. gender, age) should be used to qualify the quotes of interview respondents. Because the e-mail documents represented personal interactions, it was not clear whether descriptive information (e.g. first name, date of posting) should accompany excerpts from the e-mail documents.

In the chapters that follow, quotes from interviews and excerpts from the e-mail documents all originate from individuals who explicitly agreed to take part in the study. In quoting interview respondents, and in using document excerpts, various aspects of the text (e.g. spelling errors, fonts, formatting) are preserved in order to represent the original communications accurately, and to provide the reader with a sense of how these data were distinct from conventional interview transcripts and documents. It is hoped that this also provides the reader with a sense of how participants communicated with one another, and how the researcher and participants interacted. As well, any elements that identify research participants, or
the mailing list, have been removed from the interview quotes and document excerpts.

Concluding Statements

The use of networking technology to conduct this study both facilitated and complicated the research process, and influenced the project at every "stage". The breakdown of the electronic MASH group prior to ethics approval necessitated a complete overhaul of the research design, including a shift from a concurrent to a retrospective analytic approach. This shift resulted in ethical and methodological benefits (e.g. no disruption to group process) and drawbacks (e.g. physical examination of archives necessary to identify research participant candidates).

The technology aided the researcher in bounding the study within a time context by facilitating the copying of recorded data for a discrete, three month time period. However, only the messages that were sent to the mailing list address were "visible" to the researcher, and thus any private e-mail communicated among group members was not included in the analysis.

From an ethical perspective, the borders distinguishing "public" and "private" domains were fuzzy upon gaining entry to the list and were reflected in the variety of responses from the mailing list subscribers. Furthermore, there are few guidelines to assist researchers in acting responsibly in the collection and use of computer-networked information.
E-mail was a viable way of obtaining informed consent from the subscribers of the mailing list. In total, one quarter of the individuals subscribing to the mailing list between January and April, 1996 agreed to participate in the study. It is believed that the relatively high response rate was reflective of careful construction of the consent form, as well as an up front explication of how the data would be used. However, it was not clear how to manage the archived e-mail data contributed by those who did not explicitly consent or refuse participation in the study, and this is a point of consideration for future studies.

The identification of potential research participants through an examination of the mailing list archives meant that no "lurkers" could be identified and invited to participate in on-line interviews in phase two of the study. This, in turn, had implications for obtaining a range of experiences of the list since only those individuals who actively participated in the list could be invited for participation in interviews. Particularly, the effect of this on analysis became clear as the concept of "lurking" as a benefit of being on the list was identified by participants.

In addition to providing alternatives to active participation (e.g. "lurking") for mailing list subscribers, the technology also had implications for the interactions between the researcher and the research participants. Specifically, the lack of a shared physical context between researcher and participants had implications for conducting interviews and for analyzing interview data. Interpretation of the meanings that participants ascribed to their experiences of the electronic MASH group was hindered by the lack of bodily cues, speech patterns, and spontaneity in interview responses. Furthermore, the brevity of the interview responses made it
difficult to attain the momentum necessary to support and propel a truly inductive study, although trends and general themes could still be observed.

While the findings presented in this chapter relate directly to how the technology influenced the research process, these are nested within larger issues that are central to qualitative research. In the following chapter, I consider how these larger issues are problematized by using networking technology to conduct naturalistic, qualitative research.

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1 The word "stage" is used loosely in this context. Especially in qualitative research, there is great movement between data collection, analysis, and considerations of the research design.
2 That is, given the extreme fluidity with which electronic groups (especially those with little formal structure) are characterized, it should not be assumed that these groups are stable over time. In fact, these groupings are extremely fluid and malleable over time and are especially sensitive to both technological (e.g. operating software) and social (e.g. conflicts) forces.
3 According to the list owner, the breakdown of the group was a result of failure of technical hardware. While unfortunate, this illustrated the interplay between the technical and the social in online communication and relationship formation. I was made aware of these changes by the list owner who informed me that I could use the mailing list archives with permission from the appropriate e-mail authors.
4 In the original research design I had intended to join the mailing list, identifying myself as a researcher with support from the list owner, and to record and analyze e-mail interactions as they occurred on the list. In the revised research design, I simply downloaded e-mail from the archives stored on the host computer for a three month period and performed a retrospective analysis of past e-mail postings contributed by those individuals subscribing to the list who provided me with permission to do so.
5 It should be noted, however, that participation in other types of electronic forums do not require individuals to subscribe (e.g. newsgroups). In turn, these provide a more public type of forum as evidenced by the generally greater number of commercial postings that occur on newsgroups.
6 Although measures were taken to make the electronic consent form easy to understand, it should be noted, however, that the audience was fairly technologically literate given their experience in communicating by e-mail (by virtue of having been a member of an electronic MASH group).
7 Lynne Schrum was contacted in regard to this matter, but she did not have experience with this specific situation.
CHAPTER SIX: USING THE INTERNET TO CONDUCT QUALITATIVE HEALTH RESEARCH: METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

Introduction

The findings presented in Chapter Five reflect the unique demands of using the Internet to mediate naturalistic research with a computer-networked group. These findings, however, are nested within broader methodological and ethical issues that are central to qualitative research. This chapter addresses these broader methodological issues and discusses how they were re-framed by the computer networking technology that mediated the research. In the next chapter, I present the broader ethical issues within which the ethical findings presented in Chapter Five are located. The re-framing of spatial and temporal referents of interaction (participant-participant, researcher-participant), and its implications for participants’ experiences and research methodology, is a thread that weaves its way through the subsequent analyses.

The first section of this chapter considers how the nature of the MASH group, as the social setting for the study, was influenced by the computer networking technology that mediated support among the mailing list subscribers. Specifically, excerpts from interviews and e-mail documents are used to illustrate how the technology influenced the nature of the social setting through an examination of the meaning of “boundaries” under electronic conditions. Following this, the implications of “fluid” group boundaries for participants’ experiences, and for research methodology, are discussed.
The second section of this chapter discusses the implications of using computer networking technology (i.e. the Internet) for the process of conducting qualitative research. The relationship between the “inquirer” (i.e. researcher) and the “inquired-into” (i.e. phenomenon being studied) is the primary focus, with particular attention to issues concerning the meaning of context, analytic approach to e-mail message documents, and the construction of knowledge.

Implications of Technology for Nature of Social Setting

In this section, I describe the concept of “fluidity” and relate this to the unique spatial and temporal referents of asynchronous communication that characterized interaction among subscribers to the electronic MASH group. Specific examples from the mailing list archives and interviews are used to illustrate how the re-framing of temporal and spatial referents influenced the ways in which the social setting was bound, and, in turn, shaped social interaction and supportive exchanges on the mailing list. The implications that this re-framing had for participants’ experiences of the list are discussed. Finally, the implications of “fluidity” for the implementation of naturalistic research methodology with electronic (MASH) groups are addressed.

A central theme that emerged during the study was the “fluidity” with which the boundaries of the on-line group were characterized. “Fluidity” is used to capture the essence of the malleability of the electronic MASH group as a social setting for research. This malleability, or “fluidity”, was observed at many points during the inquiry, and was illustrated in an extreme form when the e-mail list of interest to the
study dissolved completely and re-formed into a new group with a new list owner. The manifestations of “fluidity” are discussed throughout the following sections of this chapter.

“Fluid” Boundaries

Defining boundaries of a social setting is a crucial step in naturalistic qualitative research, for it articulates what is inside the scope of interest to the inquiry and it aids in understanding the context in which a phenomenon is observed and studied. Miles and Huberman describe boundaries as defining the context in which the case of interest is studied, where the case of interest may be an individual, an organization, a community, or a nation (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Spatial and temporal referents characterizing e-mail communication are distinct from those that structure face-to-face interaction. Because of this, the concept of “boundaries” is re-framed in electronic social settings. The unique temporal and spatial referents that characterized social interaction on the mailing list meant that boundaries defining the social setting were more fluid (i.e. less stable) than those typically defining face-to-face groups. In turn, this had methodological implications and affected participants’ experiences of the list.\(^1\)

**The Meaning of “Boundary” in Computer-Networked Groups: Spatial Referents Re-Considered:** In contrast to face-to-face communication, physical co-presence is not required for communication by e-mail. Therefore, social interaction among members of a mailing list occurs in the absence of a shared physical
context. Bounding computer-mediated social settings, then, is unlike research in face-to-face settings in that it is not facilitated by geographical considerations (e.g. studying self-help groups in Toronto). This also has implications for group membership since individuals from any part of the globe can theoretically participate in computer-networked support groups.

Even though the list was not grounded in geographic space, the imagery of the mailing list as a social space was actively constructed by subscribers who posted to the list. In the e-mail archives, and in interview responses, the conception of the list as "place" was produced by participants. For instance, the lack of a shared physical context is acknowledged in the following e-mail excerpt from the mailing list archives in which Harry replies to Andi's e-mail posting of thanks. This is evident in the poster's use of quotation marks to denote words that normally evoke meaning only in face-to-face physical contexts. In doing this, imagery of the mailing list as "place" is produced:

*From Hollis Mon Jan 22

> Thank you all for being here. . . . even when I couldn't see you.
> Andi
> I know where you're coming from, Andi. You're welcome. Actually, thank _you_. And, as they say, "keep coming back". Missing these "meetings" can be dangerous in the early days. I've been "attending" here daily. Don't know if I would have made it this far otherwise.

Harry
Clock now stands at:
2m0w3d5h15m
This imagery of list as "place" was also evident in interview responses. For example, in her description of how the list assisted her in quitting smoking, one respondent replied:

WHEN I FOUND THE LIST, I REALIZED THAT I HAD FOUND A PLACE THAT I COULD GO TO VENT MY FEELINGS WHEN I WANTED TO SMOKE INSTEAD OF JUST GOING TO SMOKE OR BEING ANGRY THAT I COULDN'T. (Andi)

Interestingly, this quote also relates the conception of the list as "place" to the timing of subscribers' participation in the list (i.e. posting of messages to the list) such that the list was "there" when needed or wanted by subscribers. In contrast to face-to-face social settings, which are grounded in physical contexts, the mailing list as "place" did not exist independently of participants' interactions in the list. Rather, the construction of the conception of "place" is dependent on individual participation and communication among mailing list members. This relationship between the construction of the list as "place" and the timing of participation in the on-line MASH group is articulated in the following quote in which an interview respondent identifies the key features of the list that were critical for her success in quitting smoking. Specifically, she relates her conception of the list as a "place" to deal with negative feelings with her ability to access that group whenever needed on a twenty-four hour basis:

The main thing was having an outlet to deal with the addiction 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, as needed. Having a place to express how awful it was feeling, and a place where people would encourage me to stay smoke free, and remind me of all the reasons i'd wanted to quit in the first place. I could not do that with friends and family because:

a. people who've never smoked find it very boring
b. people who are still smoking are threatened by it and only want to sabotage your efforts

But the people on xxxxxxxx were in the right place to steer me in the right direction and needed the same help themselves, from me. (Victoria)

The Meaning of “Boundary” in Computer-Networked Groups: Temporal Referents Re-Considered: In addition to spatial referents, the temporal referents that characterize e-mail interaction are unique from those characterizing face-to-face interaction. In contrast to face-to-face MASH groups, interaction in electronic MASH groups does not occur in “real” (i.e. shared) time. Therefore, a common or shared time context is not necessary for participants of an electronic MASH group to “convene” and exchange messages and advice. Instead, individuals participating in electronic MASH groups read and post messages at their own leisure such that the posting of messages to the list, or to individual subscribers, and the retrieval of messages is under complete control of each individual subscriber.

Because of this re-framing of temporal referents, communication in mailing lists is asynchronous or non-linear, producing a “staggered” character to the interaction between mailing list participants. At the same time, the (semi) permanency of e-mail messages means that they were easily copied in participants’ replies. This, in turn, helped to preserve a sense of continuity or flow of conversation in the mailing list. This is illustrated in the following passage excerpted from the e-mail archive documents in which Greg’s self-introduction to the list is copied into Blair’s response:
*From Blair Thu Jan 4 06:26:27 CST 1996, Subject:
Re: I'm new
Hi everyone,

I have been lurking for about a week now. I resolved to quit at midnight on New Years Eve. I had been a pack-a-day smoker (Camel strait) for 25 years. Many things brought me to the point of quitting. I have emphysema (beginning stage), I am currently unemployed (band & computer science teacher) and am going through a divorce. Many changes, but mostly, my 8 year old son was bugging me to quit. He is wonderful. I am a professional musician (upright string bass & nylon string guitar) and he performs with me (congas) whenever I am playing somewhere that is not a bar.

I knew my habit was beyond my control. I have been cheating (3-5 a day) since then and am feeling very bad about it. Your letters are an inspiration to me and I am going to keep trying. I'm doing better than I ever have (I have tried to quit numerous times) and I am NOT going to give up! Please just send me your energy.

Greg XXXXXXX :)  
---------------------------------------------------------
-----
Greg,

You are on the right track and in the right place if you have the desire to quit. You may be cheating by having a few but you are cutting down substantially from the pack you were previously smoking a day. By cutting down to a few a day and then going to none you will have an easier time getting over the physical withdrawal symptoms.

Keep wanting to quit and thinking about it everytime you light up a cigarette and keep posting to the group. Some people have a difficult time going cold turkey and are better off cutting back on their smoking until they reach the point where they are only having a few a day. At this point they can stop completely.

=================
Blair XX. XXXX
=================

The staggered style of communication, together with the (semi) permanent nature of e-mail messages, also facilitated participants in re-visiting past topics. For
example, the “lurker”, Greg, who elicited a response from Blair in the previous
passage, elicited another response of a different nature from Linda four hours later.
Again, the original posting is copied into her reply in order to preserve a sense of
flow to the “conversation”:

*From Linda Thu Jan 4 10:21:41 CST 1996, Subject: Re: I'm new
Hi Greg,

>I have been lurking for about a week now. I resolved to
quit at midnight on New Years Eve. I had been a pack-a-
day smoker (Camel strait) for I knew my habit was beyond
my control. I have been cheating (3-5 a day)
>since then and am feeling very bad about it. Your
letters are an >inspiration to me and I am going to keep
trying. I'm doing better than I >ever have (I have tried
to quit numerous times) and I am NOT going to give >up!
Please just send me your energy.

Welcome to the group! We'll send you energy, support and
whatever else you need. You will find the strength to
finally dump the cigs for good. Kids are great! My 12 yr
old flautist bugged me incessantly for being a *drug*
addict. If we only had the same anti-drug education as
the kids do nowadays!
We'll talk more later.

Implications of “Fluidity” for Participants’ Experiences

In this section, the implications of “fluid” boundaries for participants’
experiences of the mailing list are discussed. In the first sub-section, the re-framing
of spatial referents is related to participants’ experiences of alternative ways of
being (e.g. “posting”, “lurking”) on the list as compared to their involvement in face-
to-face groups. Anonymity is described as a key feature of “posting” or “lurking” in
the mailing list, and the implications of anonymity for disclosure are discussed. In
the second sub-section, the re-framing of spatial and temporal referents is related to
an increase in opportunities for accessing support. In particular, the re-framing of temporal referents is related to participants' experiences of around-the-clock support as a result of their involvement in the list. In turn, the ability to access the group, and to receive support, as needed, is related to the experience of a sense of belonging on the list.

Alternative Ways of Being, Anonymity and Disclosure: In terms of participants' experiences, the ability to transcend physical space, and to communicate asynchronously, had both benefits and drawbacks. The re-framing of spatial referents created possibilities for alternative "ways of being" on the list. In comparison to face-to-face groups, the ability to "lurk" - that is, read but not post messages to the list - was perceived by participants as a primary difference between subscribing to the mailing list and belonging to a face-to-face group. While it is tempting to draw an analogy between "lurking" and being silent in a face-to-face group, there are fundamental differences between these two ways of being as pointed out by an interview respondent in the following quote:

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE IN FACE TO FACE GROUPS TO OBSERVE WITHOUT BEING OBSERVED EVEN THOUGH ONE REMAINS SILENT. IN THAT SENSE, LURKING IS NOT AN OPTION IN F.T.F. GROUPS (Susan)

Thus, unlike being in an electronic group, it is impossible to be part of a face-to-face group and not be identified (i.e. remain anonymous). The high level of anonymity associated with "lurking" may also have implications for membership in electronic forums. According to one respondent who participated (posted) to the list only on a few occasions:
I DO NOT LIKE DOING THINGS IN GROUPS (FACE TO FACE) THE LIST GAVE ME THE OPPORTUNITY TO BE IN A GROUP WHERE I MOSTLY LURKED. (Ron)

This suggests that individuals who are unlikely to join face-to-face groups may feel more comfortable "lurking" in an electronic MASH group.

In addition to this ability to remain completely anonymous as a "lurker", increased anonymity was also perceived as a primary difference compared to face-to-face MASH groups by those subscribers who actively participated in, or posted messages to, the list:

... the main difference from face-to-face is the possibility of anonymity if and when desired and the removal of visual biased we inevitably experience as human beings when we meet face-to-face... (Barry)

The quality of anonymity made possible by "fluid" boundaries was also related to the idea that subscribers could easily come and go in electronic groups. Movement between participation (i.e. posting) and "lurking" is noted in the following description of the list provided by an interview respondent. In this analogy, the respondent notes how the possibility for anonymity offers a greater ability to check out groups casually before joining or actively participating in them:

I WOULD TELL THEM THAT IT IS LIKE BEING IN A ROOM WITH A GROUP OF INDIVIDUALS WITHOUT FACES AND YOU ARE ABLE TO EXPRESS ANY AND ALL FEELING YOU WANT. YOU ARE ALSO ABLE TO SIT BACK AND JUST LISTEN AND NOT HAVE TO INTERACT IF THAT IS WHAT YOU WANT TO DO,, TRY IT,,, IT CANT HURT YOU!!! (Chris)

Similarly, the ease of movement also meant that one could disengage from the list easily, as indicated in the following passage:

At the opposite end of the spectrum, when I was ready to leave the group, I spent a day or so saying goodbye and
then I unsubscribed without any pressure to continue to participate. There was a total freedom to come and go as I saw fit... Picking and choosing when to participate in group discussions or when not to participate is not always possible in face groups – peer group pressure more likely in face groups – pressure to conform more likely in face groups. Being able to lurk or make private contact is one of the chief advantages of e-mail in my opinion. (Barry)

This ease of movement in and out of electronic groups has also been observed in other studies, and is summed up nicely by Leighton in her observations of an online group which is described by one member as a place where “people [can] come swinging in on vines, just to see who’s hanging out ...” (Leighton, 1995).

The capability for anonymity also had implications for disclosure. Some participants felt that they disclosed more information about themselves on the list due to the increased anonymity associated with the electronic format, leading them to be more “open” and “honest”. In contrast, some respondents felt that the medium had negative consequences for disclosing information about themselves on the list.

In her comparison of how she disclosed information about herself in face-to-face MASH groups versus the mailing list, one respondent replied:

    THAT IS EASIER FOR ME FACE TO FACE, BECAUSE I CAN JUDGE FROM A PERSON'S FACE IF THEY ARE JUDGING ME, WITH WRITING THINGS LIKE"I AM A GAY PERSON", I DON'T KNOW WHAT KIND OF REDNECK RESPONSE I MIGHT GET FROM TENNESSEE, SO I DID NOT DISCLOSE THIS ON THE LIST, THOUGH I DID IN PRIVATE E MAIL TO MY FRIENDS.(Starster)

Others found disclosure difficult in both face-to-face and electronic groups:

    I AM CIRCUMSPECT IN BOTH SITUATIONS, MORE SO THAN MOST OTHERS, I THINK. THIS IS ONE OF THE THINGS THAT REDUCED MY LEVEL OF 'CONNECTION' WITH SOME OF THE PEOPLE, BUT IT WAS NECESSARY FOR ME. I AM UNCOMFORTABLE WITH THE EASE OF INFORMATION ACCESS ON THE INTERNET, AND WARY OF SOMEHOW PEOPLE OUTSIDE THE LIST COMING UPON INFORMATION
ABOUT ME THAT I WOULDN'T WANT THEM TO KNOW. FOR INSTANCE, MOST OF THE CLIENTS I WORK WITH DIDN'T KNOW I WAS A SMOKER WHEN I WAS SMOKING AND I DIDN'T WANT THEM TO FIND OUT. AS I GOT TO KNOW OTHERS IN THE GROUP I HAD AN IMPULSE TO BE VERY OPEN ABOUT MYSELF BUT WAS HELD BACK BY THESE TYPES OF FEARS. (Victoria)

The relationship between alternative ways of being, anonymity, and disclosure is presented graphically in Figure 2.

Figure 2. "Lurking" and "Posting" as a Continuum of Anonymity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lurking</th>
<th>Posting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• no participation</td>
<td>• participation in list</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 1-way interaction (receive / read messages)</td>
<td>• 2-way interaction (post and receive/read messages)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• no disclosure</td>
<td>• higher disclosure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• high anonymity</td>
<td>• lower anonymity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Access, Timing and Sense of Belonging:** Fluid boundaries had implications for how participants accessed the group. Geographically speaking, the medium provided a way of soliciting support for those individuals who did not have access to MASH groups in their local physical environment. In addition to providing an alternative resource for support, the transcendence of physical space was interpreted as offering a wider diversity of support as compared to face-to-face groups:

WIDER VARIETY OF SUPPORT ON THE LIST. F2F MEETINGS TEND TO BE AS LIMITED AS THE AREA IN WHICH THE PEOPLE COME FROM. FOR INSTANCE, I LIVE IN A SMALL SOUTHERN TOWN AND THE F2F MEETINGS REFLECT THAT. ON THE LIST, THE GROUP IS
FAR MORE DIVERSE AND BETTER EDUCATED. THE TYPE OF SUPPORT REFLECTS BOTH THE DIVERSITY AND THE EDUCATIONAL LEVEL OF THE PARTICIPANTS. (Andi)

Diversity was reflected in mailing list membership. While the majority of participants in the present study were from the United States, the social setting (electronic MASH group) also included members from other countries, including Canada, Japan, and the Netherlands.

The ability to choose when one accessed the group was seen by participants as a major benefit of being on the mailing list. This "instantaneous" access was interpreted by group members as having a non-stop support group available at their disposal 24 hours a day:

As I stated previously, the prime benefits for me were two fold - first was the pleasure of communicating with others trying to quit or had quite who I know could related to my feelings, situation, withdrawal pains, emotional and mental state since they were going through the same basic experience as me - misery loves company :) Second was the on-line, almost instantaneous access to the group via e-mail so that I could get support (or give support) whenever I felt the need 24 hours per day, seven days a week. I do not be-live any other 'traditional' quit smoking support group could offer almost instant access to support as required. (Barry)

In interview responses, the ability to access the group when needed was related to a reduced sense of isolation. In her description of her feelings of being on the list, the interview respondent in the following passage relates her experience of reduced isolation to the constant support offered by the list:

I HAD TRIED TO QUIT SMOKING FOR TEN YEARS. FOR THE FIVE YEARS OR SO PRIOR TO FINDING THE XXXXXXXX LIST, I TRIED A MILLION WAYS TO QUIT. MY SMOKING WAS DOWN TO ABOUT 3-5 CIGARETTES A DAY SUPPLEMENTED WITH NICORETTE. WHEN I FOUND THE LIST, I REALIZED THAT I HAD FOUND A PLACE THAT
I could go to vent my feelings when I wanted to smoke instead of just going to smoke or being angry that I couldn't. I realized that I was not alone in my experience -- that virtually everybody goes through a similar process. Unlike a face-to-face support group, the list gave me instant gratification -- a factor that was instrumental I believe in helping me quit. The support was constant and unconditional. And, the list gave me an opportunity to help other people which reinforced the process for me. (Andi)

Furthermore, research participants associated the "instantaneous" nature of responses to their posts with the experience of "belonging". In the following excerpt from an on-line interview, a respondent attributes her experience of "belonging" while on the list to her receiving immediate responses from other mailing list subscribers:

I received immediate encouragement for my quit date, welcoming, acknowledging, responses to all my posts. I felt a sense of belonging right away. In F2F groups (I've been to many different kinds of support groups) I've had that sense like maybe 3 per cent of the time. (Starster)

Alternatively, not receiving responses to one's posts was associated with not experiencing a sense of belonging among some subscribers. This is indicated in the following passage from an on-line interview with a subscriber who did not share the experience of "belonging":

ER: While you said that "sense of community" was a salient aspect of the list, you also point out that a drawback of being on the xxxxxxxxx list was that you "never really "connected" with the people nor got a sense of who they were".

>a/How did you know you were not "connected" to the others on the list? In other words, how could you tell that you were not "connected" to the others on the list?
EE: NO ONE RESPONDED TO COMMENTS I POSTED. I FELT WHEN I JOINED THE LIST I HAD ENTERED A CONVERSATION AT MIDPOINT AND HAD NO CLUES AS TO WHAT WAS BEING DISCUSSED, WHO THE DISCUSSANTS WERE, AND HOW THEIR COMMENTS RELATED TO STOPPING SMOKING.

>b/How did it make you feel to be not connected to the others on the list? FRUSTRATED>

ER: >c/Would you describe this “unconnectedness” as being an “outsider”? Is there a better word to describe how you saw yourself with respect to the xxxxxxxx list?

EE: OUTSIDER WORKS; ALSO, STRANGER WHOM NO ONE TALKS TO (Susan)

Group Structure, Group Process and “Fluidity”: The informal group structure, and the implicit nature of rules that guided participation in this list⁴, reinforced the “fluidity” of the group’s boundaries. With regard to group process, participants identified differences between the pace of the list in comparison to face-to-face groups:

EVERYTHING IS SPEEDED UP ON THE LIST IN COMPARISON TO F2F MEETINGS. PEOPLE GET ACTIVE MORE QUICKLY, TAKE CHARGE MORE QUICKLY AND LEAVE MORE QUICKLY. ON THE LIST, PEOPLE TEND TO DISAPPEAR AFTER THEY HIT ONE YEAR. IN F2F MEETINGS, IT TAKES A LOT LONGER THAN THAT. AFTER 14 YEARS, I STILL GO TO MY F2F MEETINGS AND CAN’T CONCEIVE OF EVER NOT GOING. (Andi)

In turn, this had implications for the ability of subscribers to follow and join in conversations.

I FELT THAT I COULD NOT FOLLOW THE TOPIC’S BY JUST CHECKING IN EVERY NOW AND THEN... I WAS NOT ABLE TO KEEP UP WITH THE DAILY CONVERSATIONS, IT’S LIKE SITTING IN A MEETING AND LEAVING FOR A PERIOD OF TIME AND COMING BACK AND WANTING TO KNOW WHAT YOU MISSED... (Chris)
With regard to group structure, "fluidity" was enhanced as the mailing list was consistently re-constructed with changing group membership. As one respondent in this study put it:

IT WAS TOTAL ANARCHY. THEY SAID IT RAN ON LOVE...I SAW LOTS OF FIGHTS MYSELF AND LOTS OF ANGER. IT WAS JUST AN ANARCHOUS ANOMALY TO ME...THE LIST MORPHED INTO WHATEVER PEOPLE WERE ON IT AT THE TIME. THERE WAS REALLY ONLY A SHORT PERIOD WHERE I LOVED IT. ACTUALLY I FEEL JUST LUCKY THAT I HIT IT WHEN I DID, AND IT WORKED. AT THE END I HATED IT. MYAYBE IT WAS JUST THE NOVELTY OF IT AND THE NET AND SO FORTH THAT WAS SO FUN (Starster)

Another respondent reflected at length on the influence of group structure on continuity of membership, and compared her involvement in the mailing list with her involvement with a newsgroup that operated within the tradition of Alcoholics Anonymous:

To summarize, the lack of shared physical referents provided participants with alternative ways of being on the list. At one extreme, the ability to "lurk" (i.e. read but not post messages) was associated with the highest level of anonymity possible in the mailing list. Also, those who actively posted to the mailing list experienced a greater ease of movement in between active participation ("posting") and "lurking". For some members who posted to the mailing list, this increased anonymity was associated with higher levels of disclosure. However, other participants felt that they disclosed the same amount or less information about themselves in the mailing list as compared to their involvement in face-to-face groups.

The re-framing of temporal referents had implications for how participants accessed the group. In particular, the ability to access the mailing list when needed was experienced by participants as having a constant source of support. Furthermore, the experience of being responded to relatively immediately led to the experience of "belonging" by reducing the sense of isolation among subscribers in their quest to quit or reduce their smoking. Conversely, not being responded to was associated with a reduced sense of "belonging".

The informal nature of group structure and process observed in the mailing list enhanced the "fluidity" with which the mailing list's boundaries were characterized and had implications for participants' experiences. In particular, the lack of an explicit structure by which support was mediated, and the rapid pace of the list in moving from topic to topic, made it difficult for some subscribers to follow and join in conversations.
Implications of "Fluid" Boundaries for Research Methodology

"Theoretical sampling" is a central concept of inductive, qualitative research that refers to the sampling of data on the basis of the concepts or theory that emerge from data analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Thus, theoretical sampling allows for the elaboration of themes and concepts that emerge as the study unfolds, thus allowing for an inductive analytical process. In addition to defining the boundaries of the social setting, the process of theoretical sampling imposes further limits on qualitative research.

In the present study, the mailing list archives were used as a way of identifying potential research participants. However, this method limited the identification of potential research participants to only those who posted to the list. Thus, "lurkers" were excluded from being invited to take part in an on-line interview. At the same time, the ability to "lurk" was identified by research participants as a significant aspect of subscribing to the electronic MASH group. As a result, the reliance on the mailing list archives as the sole method of recruiting research participants had implications for theoretical sampling in this study. In turn, this limited theorizing regarding the differences in the experiences of "lurkers" and "posters" on the list.

Because the ability to "lurk" emerged as a significant aspect of participants' experiences of the list, it would have been ideal to compare the experiences of "lurkers" and "posters". However, the reconstruction of participants' experiences of the list was based on reports from posters only. Therefore, it was impossible to consider thoroughly how alternative ways of being on the list ("lurking", "posting")
was conceptually related to other aspects of participants' experiences. While the relationship between "lurking", anonymity, and disclosure was discussed in the previous section, these are considered provisional given the lack of data from true "lurkers" (i.e. individuals who never posted to the list). However, even if true "lurkers" could have been identified in the present study, it should be noted that, for the same reasons that individuals decide to "lurk" (i.e. increased anonymity), they are likely to yield the least information as research participants.

Implications of Technology for Process of Conducting Naturalistic Research

The interactive nature of the relationship between "inquirer" and "inquired-into" is a basic belief of naturalistic inquiry. This relationship is perhaps explained best in a passage from The Paradigm Dialog (Guba, 1990).

...the results of an inquiry are always shaped by the interaction of inquirer and inquired into. There is no Archimedean point. And if there is such an intimate interconnectedness in the physical sciences, how much more likely is it that the results of social inquiry are similarly shaped? This problem of interaction is devastating to both positivism and postpositivism. First, it renders the distinction between ontology and epistemology obsolete; what can be known and the individual who comes to know it are fused into a coherent whole. Further, it makes the findings of an inquiry not a report of what is 'out there' but the residue of a process that literally creates them. Finally, it depicts knowledge as the outcome or consequence of human activity; knowledge is a human construction, never certifiable as ultimately true but problematic and ever changing. (p. 26, original emphasis)

In the present study, the lack of a shared time / space context between myself, as researcher, and the research participants had major consequences for the ethical conduct of the inquiry and for constructing knowledge about participants' experiences of the mailing list. This section examines how the networking
technology influenced the process of conducting the research and data analysis. Particular attention is paid to the implications of the technology for: articulating the context of social interaction in electronic settings; developing an analytical approach appropriate for e-mail data; and constructing knowledge about participants' experiences. In the next chapter, the implications of the technology for distinguishing between "public" and "private" settings are discussed.

Implications of Technology for Articulating Context

The goal of naturalistic research is to understand the meaning of social behaviour as it occurs in its natural context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In the naturalistic paradigm, an understanding of the natural setting in which social interaction occurs is essential to interpreting the meaning of participants' subjective experiences. However, exactly what should be considered as "context" is unclear in electronic, text-based social settings.

In comparison to face-to-face social settings, the meaning of context is reframed in non-physical, text-based social settings. In order to illustrate this, it is helpful to draw on face-to-face scenarios of research with mutual aid/self-help groups. For instance, in a face-to-face study, a researcher would typically make efforts to describe the local context in which the mutual aid/self-help meetings occurred, and would include information about the physical surroundings, the time the meetings typically occurred, and the ways in which the meetings were structured (for example, see Parker (1991)). In this way, analysis of the substance of the
MASH group meetings could be described relative to the context in which the meetings occurred.

The re-framing of physical and temporal referents that is characteristic of asynchronous electronic communication complicates the articulation of “context” within which a computer-mediated group is developed and sustained. Some have suggested that context is created in computer-mediated groups by the informal discussion among group members. For example, Rheingold suggests that the small talk or “chit chat” observed on many mailing lists creates a friendly and informal context within which more serious processes and discussions can occur (e.g. social support) (Rheingold, 1993). Elements of group structure can also influence the context of computer-mediated groups. For example, in her ethnography of a networked college class, Mary Lynn Rice-Lively notes how two different newsgroups, both of which were used as a support to a university course, developed distinct implicit rules for the tone, length and appearance of messages:

The discussion and assignment-oriented newsgroups included little or no ASCII art or use of emoticons. These messages were longer and more formal, using grammatically correct and complete sentences; occasionally, the writer even used paragraph indentation. With few exceptions, these postings revealed little personal information about the author (Rice-Lively, 1994), p. 32

In contrast:

The ‘weekly_discussions’ newsgroup, in Alex’s words, was ‘somewhere you meet outside of class and chat about things. Or maybe get off the subject in the classroom and talk about things that are interesting to you, but still is course-related’, (Rice-Lively, 1994) p. 32
The Construction of Context: In the present study, context was constructed by subscribers who posted to the list in different ways. First, in the same vein as in Rheingold's analysis, off topic messages (i.e. e-mail messages not about quitting smoking) often resembled "small talk" and helped to create a casual environment within which supportive messages could be exchanged. Interestingly, the long standing members of the list were more likely to post off topic, contextual messages of this sort. In an extreme, yet telling, example, a "newbie" who complained about the "sexist" jokes posted by a long standing member was reprimanded publicly on the list for "speaking" his mind. Also, a research participant conveyed a similar experience in an on-line interview:

ONE THING THAT KEPT ME FROM PUBLIC DISCLOSURE WAS THE NATURE OF THE HUMOR IN THE JOKES THAT WERE FORWARDED TO THE LIST. THEY WERE RACIST SEXIST, HOMOPHOBIC, YOU NAME IT. WHEN I COMPLAINED ONCE THAT THERE WAS TOO MUCH MALE BASHING AND SEXUAL INNUENDO GOING ON I WAS ACCUSED OF HAVING NO SENSE OF HUMOR. (Starster)

Interestingly, these observations suggest that, while the context may have seemed friendly on a superficial level, this may have reflected a repression of participation by those who did not share the same beliefs and values as those conveyed by contextual, off topic postings (e.g. jokes).

Context was also constructed by subscribers through the use of visual imagery. For example, on a subscriber's quitting anniversary, the "Keeper of the List" (see Chapter Four) would mail that individual a piece of ASCII art that she had collected on her "travels" on the Internet. Often, these tokens would symbolize something special to the recipient, and provided evidence that there was a sense of warmth and closeness among some of the subscribers in the mailing list. An
example of the ASCII art tokens is presented in Appendix B. Similarly, others created visual imagery directly in the text of the their e-mail messages as noted by the following interview respondent:

Sometimes the imagery people used was also somehow important. "Ro" had her "smoke-free mountain" that she was always sitting on top of, saving seats for people. This sort of image enhanced people's sense of being in a select group. (Victoria)

"Fluidity as an Influence on Context: The context of interaction in the mailing list was influenced by the absence of an explicit formal structure for participation which, in turn, encouraged flux and fluidity in group process and in participants' experiences of support. Considering Susan's observations about her experiences in different on-line MASH groups (see quote, page 91), she explicitly acknowledged how the lack of a formal structure in the list led to more off topic messages and resulted in experiences of less continuous support and lower perceived levels of support. In this sense, group structure is an influence on the construction of context in electronic groups. As Susan states in this passage, groups with more formal structure for participation (e.g. moderated groups) are less likely to permit off topic mail than those with loose group structures. Also, there were further suggestions that the context of the group changed with changing group membership (see quote from Starster, page 91). Overall, certain aspects of "fluid" group boundaries (i.e. informal group structure, changing membership) influenced the possibilities for construction of context in the electronic MASH group.
Implications for Analytical Approach to E-mail Documents

In comparison to face-to-face studies, the nature of the documents analyzed in this study were unique. On one hand, e-mail documents are comparable to informal talk in that messages can be sent and received instantaneously and with little effort producing an interactive and casual atmosphere. On the other hand, e-mail documents resemble prepared, written discourse in that messages are typed and they can be edited and re-edited prior to sending them to the intended recipient or audience (Rheingold, 1993). Furthermore, in groups such as the one in the present study where e-mail is the primary form of communication among members, social interaction occurs entirely through the exchange of textual interchanges. In essence, then, social interaction is manifested entirely by communicative acts in the form of typed, digitized e-mail messages.

The analytical approach to the e-mail documents was complicated by these unique qualities. In this section, I consider how the approach to the analysis of e-mail messages is re-framed by the technology. In particular, this type of analysis is neither an exercise in documentary analysis nor observational analysis. Rather, the analysis of e-mail messages from electronic social settings, such as an electronic MASH group, may be considered to draw on elements of both document and observational analysis.

Mailing List Archives as Documents: In some ways, the mailing list archives in the present study resembled traditional documents used in face-to-face studies. As in Hodder’s analogy of documents as “material culture”, the e-mail documents were
artifacts of social experience that endure physically over time independently of their original producers (Hodder, 1994). Unlike documents in face-to-face studies where such artifacts are left behind as traces of social behaviour, though, e-mail artifacts comprise, in and of themselves, the entire substance of social interaction in computer-mediated groups. Therefore, in contrast to the traditional treatment of documents, e-mail documents represent complete recordings of social interaction in the form of communicative actions. This is not to say that the e-mail communications were (or should be) taken at face-value. Rather, the meaning of the e-mail messages as material symbols (i.e. typed language) must be contextualized through a consideration of their broad historical context and the local context of their production, as well as the context of their re-construction during analysis (Hodder, 1994). However, as documents, e-mail recordings provide more direct insight into the actions of group members compared to other documents commonly used in face-to-face studies (e.g. diaries, field notes, reports, policy statements, memos).

_Mailing List Archives as Observation:_ Because e-mail recordings comprise the essence of social interaction in computer-mediated groups, the analysis of e-mail messages also resembles a form of observation. Like face-to-face studies, there are different roles that researchers adopt in observational studies depending on the amount and character of their involvement with the individuals being observed (Neuman, 1997). At one end of the spectrum, the researcher can adopt a complete observer role in which s/he is behind a figurative "one way mirror" and studies the group undetected by participants. In this mode, the researcher has little
or no influence on group process. At the other end of the spectrum, the researcher can act as a complete participant in which s/he is considered to have “insider” status by virtue of having first hand knowledge and experience of the group or community in question. In many cases, researchers studying groups or communities adopt a role somewhere in between these two extremes. In such cases, the researcher observes somewhere on the periphery of the group and may have formal or informal (e.g. friend) contact with group members as a way of gaining an insider perspective.

In the present study, the retrospective direction of the analysis demanded that I adopt a role which was primarily observational in nature as I had access to the majority of the e-mail messages posted to the mailing list (excluding private e-mail communications and postings from those refusing participation). At the same time, I did not actually participate in the group or have an influence on group process. However, had the original research protocol been employed - that is, had I actually subscribed to the mailing list and recorded e-mail messages concurrently as they were posted to the list - my role as researcher would have been comparable to a participant observer. In this mode, my influence as a participant observer on group process would have been significantly greater and considered at greater length in terms of its influence on the subsequent analysis of participants’ experiences.

In summary, while the qualitative data of documentary and observational analysis typically re-present social behaviour, the qualitative data obtained from electronic groups in the form of e-mail messages embodies social behaviour. While observational methods traditionally involve the visual analysis of social behaviour, and document analysis traditionally involves the analysis of words as evidence of
social behaviour, the analysis of e-mail messages requires an approach that acknowledges typed language as social interaction, and recognizes that one's analytical approach may include elements of both observational and document analysis. In part, the tendency to incorporate elements of observational analysis or documentary analysis may depend on the direction of analysis and the relationship of the researcher with the group being studied. In the present study, had I joined the group and recorded messages concurrently, the analyses may have been guided more strongly by a participant observation approach since I would have had the opportunity to witness events first hand and to participate directly as a participant observer.

Implications of Technology for Constructing Knowledge

In Chapter Five, specific findings were presented regarding the influence of the computer networking technology on the process of conducting interviews with physically remote interview respondents. In a broader sense, the re-framing of spatial and temporal referents for interaction between participants and researcher complicated the construction of knowledge regarding participants' experiences of the list.

Getting at Participants' Experiences: The majority of qualitative data collected in this study was in the form of archived e-mail digests. While analysis of the digests provided insight into the group’s structure, the typical issues posted to
the group, and the key players in the group, they were less useful in providing
insight into participants' experiences of the list. In contrast, the on-line interviews
provided more direct insight into how participants experienced the list, and what the
list meant to them. For example, the finding that control over the timing of
participation in the list was interpreted by subscribers as a benefit of being a
subscriber to the list could not have been gleaned from the e-mail messages
contained in the archives. However, this aspect of "timing", and the resulting
perceptions of control over the quitting process, came up repeatedly in interview
responses. Similarly, the ability to "lurk" as a significant aspect of participants'
experiences could not have been physically observed in the mailing list archives.
However, interview respondents consistently noted how this was an aspect that
added to their experiences of the mailing list. Unfortunately, the brevity of the
interview responses precluded an in-depth analysis of participants' experiences
based on the interviews.

The on-line interviews also added to the analysis of participants' experiences
by providing insight into how "public" e-mail messages sent to the mailing list
address differed from the e-mail exchanged privately between individual
subscribers. As one respondent noted, conflicts were more likely to be addressed
via private e-mail:

PUBLIC WAS POLITE, IN PRIVATE THERE WERE A COUPLE OF
PEOPLE I REALLY ROASTED OVER THE COALS. AND HAD LOTS OF
GIGGLES. (Starster)
Other respondents suggested that private e-mail was useful in facilitating the formation of friendships between individuals who met on the list, and in preserving the group's "balance":

... more personal information can more easily be discussed between two or more individuals using private e-mail without upsetting the group - when two or more break off from a group to talk privately, that can upset the group's balance - out of sight, out of mind. (Barry)

Re-constructing Participants' Experiences: Re-constructing participants' experiences of the list using on-line interviews was problematic given the asynchronous communication between myself and the interview respondents. As discussed earlier in Chapter Five, this electronic communication format did not allow for on-the-spot or spontaneous probing for the clarification or follow-up of participants' responses, and did not allow for any consideration of participants' physical reactions to questions (i.e. body language). From the participants' perspectives, the electronic communication format was less likely to accommodate individuals in pursuing ideas tangentially related to the subject matter more typically associated with real-time, verbal communication. Overall, I felt as though the medium imposed a "rational" framework on the thoughts and ideas of respondents that counteracted the spontaneity and free associations normally observed in verbal speech. Unlike face-to-face interview transcripts, there were no "ers", "ums", pauses, silences, exaggerations, vocal emphases, laughter, etcetera to contextualize participants' responses to the interview questions.
Finally, the exchanges between myself and the interview respondents were staggered and non-continuous and this had implications for re-constructing participants’ experiences. Specifically, the asynchronous communication made it more difficult, compared to face-to-face interviews, to stay in “tune” with the experiences of individual respondents, especially of those who took longer to return their responses. Also, unlike face-to-face interviews, more than one interview was conducted within the same time frame, a scenario comparable to trying to sustain meaningful conversations with more than one individual at one time. This complicated my ability to gain a coherent understanding of any one participant’s experiences, and the unique contextual elements surrounding and contributing to those experiences.

Concluding Statements

Communication via e-mail involves a re-framing of spatial and temporal referents such that physical co-presence, and a shared time context, is not required for social interaction. In this study, the re-framing of spatial and temporal referents had implications for both the nature of the social setting and for the process of conducting the research.

The social setting of interest to this study was characterized by “fluid” group boundaries, and this had implications for participants’ experiences and for research methodology. The implications of “fluidity” for participants’ experiences are presented in two broad conceptual groups. First, the ability to transcend physical
space was interpreted by participants as an increased ability to engage in alternative ways of being on the list (i.e. "lurking"). The concept of "lurking" was characterized by the anonymity associated with reading, but not posting to, the list. For some, this increased anonymity led to greater disclosure on the list compared to face-to-face groups. Second, the ability to solicit support when needed was interpreted by participants as having a constant, 24-hour support resource and led to perceptions of increased control over dealing with urges to smoke. While posting to the list when perceived necessary was seen as a benefit of the list, being responded to almost instantaneously led to experiences of "belonging" on the list. In addition to participants' experiences of the list, "fluidity" also had implications for theoretical sampling since the recruitment of research participants did not allow for the identification of "lurkers". Thus, an in-depth comparison of the differential experiences of "posters" and "lurkers" was not possible in this study.

The re-framing of spatial and temporal referents of interaction also had implications for the relationship between "inquirer" and that which was "inquired-into". Attaining an understanding of the local context of interaction is an integral part of the analytical process and is necessary for the construction of trustworthy interpretations that are grounded in participants' experiences. However, spatial and physical contextual elements were not relevant to the articulation of context of social interaction. Rather, consideration was given to how context was constructed by participants through the use of off topic e-mail messages, visual imagery, and how context was influenced by a lack of a formal group structure and shifted with changing group membership. In terms of the approach one takes to data analysis,
researchers should consider how the analysis of e-mail messages is simultaneously comparable to both observational analysis and documentary analysis. Furthermore, one should consider how one's analytical approach is influenced by the extent of involvement the researcher has in the electronic group, and the direction of the analysis (e.g. retrospective analysis of e-mail archives, versus concurrent recording of e-mail postings). Finally, while e-mail messages embody social interaction in mailing lists, the extent to which they allow for insight into the meaning of those interactions and events needs to be considered by researchers. In the present study, the brevity of interview responses, and the staggered nature of communication between myself and the interview respondents, limited the re-construction of participants' experiences. Even so, the data obtained from on-line interviews added significantly to the re-construction of participants' experiences of the list.

1 It should be noted that the concept of "fluid" boundaries is not specific to computer-networked groups. For instance, it is not uncommon for membership to fluctuate in face-to-face MASH groups over time, or for supportive activities to extend past the group meetings (i.e. at informal gatherings occurring after meetings). However, the effects of the unique temporal and spatial referents on patterns of communication in the mailing list stretched the possibilities for participation, thereby enhancing the "fluidity" of the social setting. This, in turn, had specific implications for participants' experiences of the mailing list.

2 While this is a theoretical possibility, it is less likely that individuals from certain areas of the world would participate in such groups because of technical barriers (e.g. lack of telephone lines) or other cultural barriers (e.g. language).

3 Interestingly, this subscriber adhered to 12 step philosophy, a philosophy not outwardly embraced by the mailing list. This rejection of 12 step philosophy was pointed out in an interview as follows:

ER: How did your experiences of the XXXXXXXX list compare to your experiences of the other computer-based group/s you have been involved in? Please note any similarities and/or differences that come to mind.

EE: ODAT IS AN AA GROUP AND A 12 STEP GROUP, SO THE PEDANTS AND KNOW IT ALLS ARE THE SAME, IT'S JUST THAT THEY HAVE THE 12 STEPS TO USE AS
WEAPONS TO WAVE IN THE EGO WARS. WHEN A 12 STEPPER CAME TO THE XXXXXXXX LIST AND WAVEd THE 12 STEPS, THEY WERE SIMPLY NOT RESPONDed TO AND WENT AWAY. XXXXXXXX WAS NOT A 12 STEP GROUP (I BELONG TO THREE 12 STEP GROUPS, SO I KNOW WHEN THEY ARE BEING USED AS WEAPONS) I STOPPED ODAt AFTER A FEW WEEkS. IT BECAME VERY BORING.

(Starstar)

4 That is, people were not required to introduce themselves and lurking was considered to be an acceptable activity on the list (see Chapter 4 for a description of these issues).

5 The problem of context in on-line communications is further complicated when one considers how the characteristics and demands of each member's physical context (i.e. immediate environment while communicating on-line) influence participation in the list. However, this is outside the scope of this study.

6 This observation is not different than that of document analysis in that the language in which a document is written gives the content meaning. The distinction is that e-mail communications occur in the absence of other contextual cues, such as the visible look of the document, the source of the document, purposes of the document, etc.

7 Some interview respondents reported that the latter quality was a benefit in terms of support giving over face-to-face MASH groups:

   I think e-mail allows individuals to think more deeply about what they want to say before they say it since editing is possible which is not in face groups.

8 However, observations of the archives that much of the talk in the group was focused on dealing with urges was used to support (triangulate) these findings regarding "timing" gleaned from the interview data.

9 While "lurking" as a benefit of being on an electronic MASH group was explicitly indicated in interviews, ideas about lurking were also observed in the archives that were used to support the interview findings. In particular, my observations of the acceptance of "lurking" on the list, and the integration of "lurking" into the experiential knowledge of the group, helped to integrate participants' perceptions of the benefits of "lurking" within the group context.
Introduction

The findings presented in Chapter Five suggest that the distinctions between public and private domains are not clear in electronic social settings. On the one hand, the mailing list was in the "public" domain in that there were no restrictions on who could subscribe to the list. Also, in terms of collecting the e-mail posted to the mailing list, the data were easily accessible via the Internet. On the other hand, observations of the unique culture and communication patterns developed by mailing list members painted a picture of the mailing list as a more "private" setting. This picture was reinforced by the list's focus on mutual support and the sharing of personal experiences, and was reflected in some subscribers' reasons for refusing participation in the study.

The lack of a clear distinction between "public" and "private" settings is not exclusive to computer-mediated groups and is a general area of concern in qualitative research:

*There is no simple distinction between 'public' and 'private' while observation in many public and semi-public places is tolerable even when the subjects are not aware of being observed (Punch, 1994), p.92*

The issue of what is considered "public" and "private" is particularly relevant for electronic settings. This is because the physical separation between researcher and participants makes it easier for researchers to observe interactions at a distance and to collect data from individuals without their knowledge.
Building on the findings of the present study, the following discussion critically examines the use of conventional ethical protocols for research with on-line groups and communities. In particular, the distinction between “public” and “private” settings is reviewed as it pertains to face-to-face research. Then, the ways in which issues related to privacy are re-framed under electronic conditions are considered and discussed.

**Private vs. Public Domains**

Invasion of privacy is considered to be an unethical research practice. In the *Guidelines on the Use of Human Subjects* used by the University of Toronto (University of Toronto, 1979), various scenarios are provided to help researchers distinguish between public and private settings. For example, according to *The Guidelines*, an airport is considered to be a public setting, and thus observing crowd traffic patterns at an airport is not considered to be an invasion of privacy. In contrast, observing individuals through a one-way mirror is considered to be an invasion of privacy, and is justified only by obtaining informed consent from participants (i.e. informing participants about the purposes, methods, and goals of the research). Although these situations provide ideal examples of public and private settings, the distinction between what is considered to be public and private in face-to-face settings is not always clear (Punch, 1994).

While the distinction between “public” and “private” settings is a general ethical issue for researchers, and qualitative researchers in particular, the lack of a
clear distinction between "public" and "private" is complicated in the study of on-line groups and communities. Primarily, this is related to two features of computer-mediated communication that make on-line communications more accessible to researchers. First, on-line data and communications are often (semi) permanent and recorded on a host computer system. Second, because computer-networked data are easily transferable from one computer to another, on-line communications can be observed and studied from physically remote locations. Because of these qualities, the Internet, by its nature, provides a vast number of databases for researchers who can conduct themselves in a seemingly non-intrusive manner. In order to explore fully the implications that this has for research ethics, and in particular privacy issues, it is useful to look first at how others have conceptualized the Internet as a medium for conducting research. By identifying the assumptions underlying these conceptualizations, the implications for privacy issues under electronic conditions become more clear.

**Internet as a Tool for Data Collection / “Information Highway”**

Many researchers have emphasized the advantages of using the Internet to mediate their research. For example, Beals notes how the recorded nature of networked communication facilitates the research process:

*Because most communication on computer networks is stored on disk, a permanent record of all conversations can be reconstructed. Data collection and transcription, typically one of the most difficult and tedious problems in psychological and linguistic research, is greatly simplified. This record of*
communication provides a new data source for psychological, social, and linguistic research (Beals, 1992), p. 327

Using the Internet to conduct research also holds special appeal to researchers who study stigmatized groups that are normally difficult to access in face-to-face contexts. In his research on drug dealers, Coomber makes the following observations about using the Internet to conduct survey research:

*The Internet and electronic mail increasingly offer the research community opportunities that it did not previously have. Access to information has increased as has access to and discussion with those working in similar areas. One other aspect of 'cyberspace' which presents enormous possibilities to the research community, currently in its infancy, is the use of the Internet to reach individuals as research subjects. In particular, there may be significant research benefits to be gleaned where the group being researched is normally difficult to reach and/or the issues being researched are of a particularly sensitive nature (Coomber, 1997), p. 1*

Furthermore, some have argued that using the Internet to research sensitive topic areas or taboo subjects results in greater reliability compared to face-to-face studies. For example, in his study *Marketing Pornography on the Internet*, Rimm (Rimm, 1995) explicitly states that the databases created from the digital records of individuals’ pornographic image viewing habits have clear advantages over self-reported pornography consumption:

*The accuracy of all prior studies has depended upon the honesty of replies people give when surveyed about their sexual tastes. In contrast, this study focuses entirely upon what people actually consume, not what they say they consume; it thus provides a more accurate measure of actual consumption. This methodology is particularly important when analyzing such taboo imagery as incest... The Carnegie Mellon study is also illuminating because its sample size is several orders of magnitude larger than previously published studies of either pornographic content or consumption. Because the data is in many respects exhaustive, statistical techniques and assumptions that are commonly invoked to impute general consumer behavior are not necessary for this dataset. Thus, the research*
team considers the inferences drawn highly robust. (Rimm, 1995), emphasis added

While these researchers focus on the advantages of the technology in facilitating access to information, little consideration is given to how the technology influences the objects of their research, or, more importantly, the ethics of their work. Particularly in the case of research with stigmatized groups, little attention is paid to how such research may violate the privacy of these individuals.

By focusing exclusively on the ability of the Internet to gain access to individuals and their information, these researchers implicitly conceptualize the Internet as a mere vehicle for information transfer, a conception consistent with the widely used metaphor of the Internet as “Information Highway”. According to this conception, the Internet provides a new access route to personal information. However, this focus on the ability of the medium to transport information de-emphasizes the importance of the social impacts of the technology as a medium of communication and human association. Specifically, there is little, if any, consideration of the influences of the Internet, as a medium of communication, on the object of study (such as an on-line group or “community”) being studied, or on the relationship between the researcher and the group or community being researched. Consequently, the ethical aspects of using the Internet for research are overlooked.
Internet as Context / “Cyberspace”

Jones (1994) departs from the transportation conception of the Internet in his discussion of the tensions between traditional ethical guidelines and new communication technologies. In this discussion, he questions the applicability of traditional ethical principles to social research involving humans in “cyberspace”. Based on a review of the University of Illinois’ ethics guidelines, Jones notes that private settings are distinguished from public settings in that private settings are those in which individuals “reasonably expect that no observation or recording is taking place” (p. 31). Based on this distinction, Jones asks, “Is cyberspace a ‘context’ within which anyone can ‘reasonably expect’ that no observation or recording is taking place” (p. 31). Jones argues that current university policies outlining ethical research practices are inadequate to deal with privacy concerns in the study of on-line communications and communities. In making this conclusion, he draws a connection between the meaning of privacy and the context of “cyberspace”:

What is important about privacy protection in electronic documents, however, is that this undeniable (and seemingly unavoidable) confusion over ‘public’ versus ‘private’ spaces would seem to confound any appeal to ‘reasonable expectations’ within such ‘contexts’ - and thus to defeat any facile translation of guidelines for ethical research on human subjects from more conventional, physical spaces to their networked counterparts (Jones, 1994), p. 32

While Jones acknowledges the problems with the application of traditional guidelines to electronic settings, he argues that adherence to ethical guidelines in
which researchers identify themselves and obtain informed consent would change
the object of study, yielding the investigation "trivial, if not pointless":

The most serious difficulty with these ethical guidelines - uncritically
transferred from their more traditional context to cyberspace - is not simply
that they would be difficult to follow. It is also that, to whatever extent that
they could be followed, they would alter the nature of the behavior we wish to
observe, record, and understand. This in turn would undermine the point of
doing the research, (Jones, 1994), p. 33

The rationale underlying this conclusion is not specific to research in electronic
social settings, but is situated within a larger debate about the nature of social
reality2. Despite this, Jones’ analysis is instructive, for he considers how
conceptions of public and private domains are re-framed by the context provided by
computer networking (i.e. "cyberspace"). In contrast to the Internet as “Information
Highway” metaphor, Jones focuses on the relationship between the Internet as a
communication medium and conceptions of “public” and “private”3.

The Internet as a Socially Constructed Space

While the Internet as “Information Highway” conception focuses on the
*technical* functions of the Internet in transporting data from one point to another, the
Internet as “Cyberspace” conception emphasizes how the medium provides a
*context* for social interaction. In turn, the “Cyberspace” metaphor allows for a
deeper analysis of how the Internet, as a context, influences the social interaction
that comprises it, and how those interactions come to be seen as “private” or
“public”.

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In contrast to the Internet as "Information Highway" metaphor, "Cyberspace" does not exist apart from the individuals who create it (through participation in mailing lists, for example). In this sense, the Internet is a socially constructed space that is dependent on human association for its creation and perpetuation. Cleaver articulates this stance succinctly in the following passage:

...it [the Net] existed and only continues to exist in the communicative actions of the humans who created and continue to recreate it. This particular system of machines is just like any other system of machines: a moment of human social relationships. While the machine system is truly an 'artifact so humanly constructed', the machine system is not 'the Net'; it is only the sinew or perhaps the nervous system of a Net constituted by human interactions. As an evolving series of human interactions the Net occupies precisely the space of those participating human beings. Humans as corporeal beings always occupy space and their personal and collective interactions structure and restructure that space (Cleaver, 1995), p.1, emphasis added

Just as "the Net" is a moment of human social relationships, private and public spaces are constructed through those relationships. In the present study, for example, some individuals who opposed the research considered the mailing list to be a "private" space. Also, interview respondents wrote about differences in privacy between the various types of forums available on the Internet (newsgroups and mailing lists):

I HAD BEEN ON SEVERAL OTHER MAILING LISTS AND ALREADY KNEW HOW THEY COULD BECAME A TYPE OF COMMUNITY. I LIKE THE RELATIVE ANONYMITY OF MAILING LISTS VERSUS THE MORE PUBLIC AREAS OF THE INTERNET LIKE NEWS GROUPS (Andi)

Interestingly, another respondent indicated how the more public areas of the Internet led her to only "lurk" on those forums:
I THINK IT'S HORRIFYING THAT "DEJANEWS" REVEALS SO MUCH ABOUT PEOPLE WHO SUBSCRIBE TO USENET NEWSGROUPS. I WOULD NEVER HAVE USED [the mailing list] AS ANYTHING BUT A LURKER IF IT WERE A NEWSGROUP. I SUB TO SEVERAL NEWSGROUPS BUT ONLY LURK FOR THIS REASON (Victoria)

As a context for human association, then, the Internet is a socially constructed space containing more or less private sub-spaces created and sustained by the individuals who participate in those spaces. Furthermore, this conception of the Internet lends itself to a more complex treatment of privacy issues in comparison to the conception of the Internet as an "Information Highway".

Issues related to privacy on the Internet are further explored in the following section. First, I review conventional uses of the concept of "privacy". In a following section I then consider how this concept has been framed, and re-framed, in electronic conditions or with computer-networked personal information. In doing this, alternative frameworks of privacy as "commodity" versus privacy as a basic "right" are considered, and linkages between the Internet as "Information Highway" and privacy as "commodity" are explored.

The Concept of Privacy: Conventional Meanings

To begin to understand the relationship between the Internet and public and private settings, it is useful to re-visit conventional meanings of "privacy" as they pertain to social research, and to then examine how those meanings are influenced under electronic conditions. Definitions of privacy commonly emphasize the control over the flow of personal information. For example, privacy has been defined as:
Privacy is a multi-dimensional construct subsuming both confidentiality and anonymity. While privacy is a characteristic of individuals or organizations, confidentiality is a characteristic of the information obtained from research participants. Therefore, keeping data confidential means limiting access to those data. Ann Cavoukian clearly distinguishes between the concepts of privacy and confidentiality:

let me assure you that the two are not one and the same. While privacy may subsume what is implied by confidentiality, it is a much broader concept involving the right to be free from intrusions, to remain autonomous, and to control the circulation of information about oneself (Cavoukian, 1996), p.1

A related but distinct concept is anonymity which refers to the separation of the information provided by research participants from their personal identity (i.e. freedom from identification). Through the assurance of confidentiality and anonymity, any potential harm that participants may experience based on their information is effectively minimized. In this way, assurance of confidentiality and anonymity are considered the major safeguards against privacy violations in social research (Punch, 1986).

The Meaning of Privacy in the Age of Networked Information

In her speech at the 18th International Privacy and Data Protection Conference, Ursula Franklin identifies two major conflicting forces shaping the future of privacy and data protection (Franklin, 1996). On one hand, privacy is

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*the claim of individuals, groups, or institutions to determine for themselves, when, how, and to what extent information about them is communicated to others (Weston (1968) as cited in Kimmel (1988)), p. 86*
conceptualized as a basic human right in which individuals are described as “citizens”. On the other hand, privacy is framed as the protection or security of data and is informed by a market or economic model. Within this framework, individuals are considered to be “consumers” and the discourse is informed by the language of the market place in which privacy is a commodity bought and sold for the ultimate purpose of gaining profit.

**Privacy as Data Security: The Market Model**

To a large extent, the public discourse on privacy concerns as they relate to the use of the Internet has focused on data security - that is, on who has access to the personal information disclosed and recorded on networked information systems. Given the ease with which information can be stored, retrieved, manipulated and transferred between computers, personal information security is a key concern regarding the use of information technology in today's society. However, the conceptualization of privacy as “security” implicitly reduces the concept of privacy to that of confidentiality (i.e. access to information). In turn, privacy becomes a concept that is used in relation to information, or data, and not in relation to individuals. As Ann Cavoukian remarks, however, issues concerning confidentiality only become relevant after information has been collected (Cavoukian, 1996). Thus, ethical considerations related to the data collection act itself are overlooked. Furthermore, the focus on issues of security shifts attention away from the political aspects of the
technology - that is, how the technology is used to acquire personal information and how that information, in turn, is used to make decisions about individuals.

"Privacy" as Commodity: The Personal Information Industry: The application of the market model of "privacy" is transparent when one considers what has come to be known as the personal information industry. While a thorough discussion of this is beyond the scope of this thesis, some points are made here to illuminate how conceptions of privacy are shaped by corporate agendas. Today, there exists a growing market in personal information that is greatly facilitated by various types of information technologies (Gandy, 1993). For example, there are numerous examples of marketing information services that drive the personal information industry. Essentially, these companies sell databases and software that allow their clients (other companies) to generate profiles of consumers by demographics, lifestyles, and retail sale expenditures, for example. In turn, businesses use these lists to conduct various types of market analyses (e.g. geodemographic analyses of spending patterns) and, ultimately, to maximize profit. In essence, privacy becomes a commodity that is bought and sold in the global market for the purposes of conducting marketing research and gaining profit.

While computer networking is but one type of information technology, remote access to personal information made possible by the Internet provides an additional support to this industry and represents a significant change and growth in the marketing of personal information to serve the interests of corporate agendas. For instance, Deja News is a search engine that provides access to the information that
individuals post to the various UseNet newsgroups. As a tool for “eMarketing”, this search engine allows marketers to create profiles on individuals who participate in newsgroups (Lawton, 1997). Deja News’ web site at (see www.dejanews.com) states the following:

*It [Deja News] keeps track of individuals users and what each user has seen, as well as other metrics, and feeds this information back to marketers. It records individuals users’ interests while preserving their anonymity. This makes it possible for Deja News to deliver extremely targeted and controlled messages without compromising the privacy of the user audience newsgroups.*

**Privacy as a Fundamental Right**

In his thought provoking analysis of the political economy of personal information, Gandy acknowledges that data security (i.e. confidentiality) is an important issue (Gandy, 1993; 1995). However, he provides a more in-depth analysis of the meaning of privacy, shifting the focus to an analysis of the economic and political consequences that result from a loss of control over the flow of personal information. In doing so, Gandy highlights the political nature of information technology itself, defining the technology as one of the “panoptic sort” and discriminatory by definition:

*It is a discriminatory technology that assigns people to groups of winners and losers on the basis of countless bits of personal information that have been collected, stored, processed, and shared through an intelligent network (Gandy, 1995), p. 36*

Thus, in addition to issues concerning confidentiality (i.e. data security), Gandy problematizes privacy violations in terms of discrimination:
... none of this writing frames the problem of privacy and surveillance in terms of discrimination, which is the end result of the social construction of difference in the pursuit of profit and social control. The panoptic sort, as a 'difference engine' in support of rationalization and efficiency, is not limited to any single sphere of our existence. Personal information is used to determine our life chances in our roles as citizens as well as in our lives as employees and consumers (Gandy, 1995), p. 37

Furthermore, the processes of classification that make use of information technologies often take place "in the background" and go unnoticed by the individuals whose information is being collected and sorted. In turn, the bases of any decisions supported by this classification are effectively concealed and privacy violations, in the form of systematic discrimination, are covert and outside of the public consciousness. This is illustrated nicely by Gandy's observation of the general public confusion over privacy concerns:

Public opinion surveys reveal that most people are very concerned about privacy. Yet, curiously these same surveys also indicate that most people are unable to identify incidents when their own privacy has been invaded. However, even though they may be unaware of it, I have no doubt that the quality of their lives has been changed because some organization has made a decision on the basis of information about them or about someone 'like them' (Gandy, 1995), p. 36

Because the variables contributing to one's classification are outside of the public awareness, personal autonomy over one's classification is limited at best. Informed consent, therefore, becomes an impossibility under such conditions:

when the groups to which people are assigned are the products of multivariate clustering techniques, where the relevant variables number in the hundreds, and the contribution of each variable is indicated by a single coefficient reflecting all the other variables held constant statistically, it is impossible for the individual to understand how to act to modify his or her status (Gandy, 1995), p.43
Ursula Franklin also emphasizes the intended uses of information when she suggests to “not look only at the tool but at the task” (Franklin, 1996, p.6). Furthermore, she draws particular attention to the protection of the privacy of powerless individuals as a social group, for the misuse of information obtained from marginalized social groups can lead to collective social images and discriminatory social policies:

*If one doesn't ask the question, ‘what are the data going to be used for?’, the powerless cannot defend themselves. They will have to rely on you to say there is a limit to datamining, not only to respect the individual, but also to respect those designated social groups who are the villains of the month ...I think, in terms of data collecting and data mining, there needs to be respect for the privacy of the powerless as a group. The poor, the single mothers, the elderly, the Alzheimer patients, require a lot of protection. And they may need that protection, not so much in the sense that an individuals might need it because their information can be misused, but in terms of the social image. The misuse, collectively, of information relating to the habits of the poor, the habits of the single mothers, are so much more likely to influence social policy than the unresearched habits of the powerful (Franklin, 1996), p. 5*

**Privacy on the Internet: The Internet as “One Way Mirror”**

While the majority of the above discussion does not pertain specifically to computer networking technology, individuals who share personal information over computer networks are particularly susceptible to privacy violations. By the nature of its decentralized technical architecture, the Internet facilitates access to personal information, as well as the transfer of that information from one computer to another. As a medium for conducting research, the Internet enhances one’s ability to observe individuals at a distance, and to collect and retrieve information from possibly unknowing individuals either directly or from second parties (e.g. Deja News).
this way, the Internet acts as a figurative one way mirror through which the observer can potentially monitor those being observed who are unaware that their actions are being monitored. As stated earlier in this chapter, in face-to-face studies, observation through a one-way mirror is considered unethical unless research participants are informed about the observational activity and the purposes for which it is being performed.

Moreover, the ways in which computer networking technology is used to support the surveillance and classification (discrimination) of individuals is associated with a decrease in personal autonomy over the flow of personal information, and over the decisions that are made on the basis of that information. This decreased autonomy over the flow of one's personal information is in direct contradiction to currently accepted definitions of privacy.

The Rimm “Cyberporn” study: A Classic Case of Misused Information: A closer examination of the Rimm “Cyberporn” study, formerly known as the Carnegie Mellon “Cyberporn” study, is illustrative for it shows how the misuse of networked information can be used to serve political ends. Also, this study clearly illustrates how a market model of privacy has been applied in the realm of social research9. The Rimm “Cyberporn” study involved analyses of: i) text descriptions of erotica files (e.g. images) taken from various adult bulletin board systems (BBSs), and ii) individuals’ reading habits of Usenet groups as obtained from private newsgroup configuration files of users stored on the Carnegie Mellon University computer system. In addition to its many methodological flaws, this project suffered from
severe ethical violations. Rimm's data gathering techniques were flawed from an ethical standpoint in that the data were clearly not for public consumption since many of the BBSs required proof of age and other information as a requirement for access. Furthermore, deceptive data gathering techniques were used in order to obtain information about the text descriptions of pornographic images and the sampling of those images. Research team members joined the BBSs (providing personal information such as their name, address, business and home phone numbers, date of birth, proof of age, and password) but did not identify themselves as researchers to the system operators or the newsgroup subscribers whose viewing habits they were tracking (Rimm, 1995; Thomas, 1996). This practice clearly violated individual privacy since informed consent by participants was not possible under these circumstances. Also, the canons of confidentiality and anonymity were not protected as one of the BBS operators was clearly identified in Rimm's discussion of the research findings. Furthermore, the collection of Usenet data on individual users from the network engineers raises the question of the propriety of "a second party collecting and distributing information to a third party for public consumption about the aggregate viewing habits of individual users" (Thomas, 1996, p. 4).

In addition to its methodological and ethical flaws, the findings of this study were used to serve political ends. Not only was the study published in a law journal, but it received considerable media attention, including a feature story in Time magazine, and the author of this study was invited to present the findings in support of the Communications Decency Act in the United States. Furthermore, there have
been allegations that the grant writing team for the study was supported by the Department of Justice who had explicit interests in identifying and prosecuting the operators of the BBSs being studied (Thomas, 1996).

Concluding Statements

Building on the findings of this study discussed in Chapter Five, it is concluded that the distinctions between what is considered “public” and “private” on the Internet are not clear. The observed lack of a clear distinction between private and public settings is not exclusive to the study of computer-networked groups, but represents a general dilemma in qualitative research. An analysis of privacy issues as they are specifically related to the study of computer-networked groups is worthwhile, however, given the ease with which personal information can be attained and transferred over the Internet.

In part, the shape of one’s analysis of privacy issues in electronic settings is dependent on the conception one adopts to understand the Internet itself. As an “Information Highway”, the Internet is conceived as providing an alternate route to conventional ways of data gathering, a route by which data are simply transferred from one point to another via computer networks. This framework easily accommodates a market model of privacy in which privacy issues are framed as problems of data security. In turn, the analysis of privacy is restricted to issues of confidentiality, or how to limit access to information, and the methods for ensuring privacy are found in technological means (i.e. using encryption methods to limit access to data). Moreover, this framework for the analysis of privacy de-
emphasizes serious consideration of the propriety of the data collection act itself and the intended uses of information that is gathered for research.

Alternatively, as a new context for human association, the Internet as "Cyberspace" is a social space that is constructed, and reconstructed, by the individuals and collectivities that communicate via a system of computer networks. In contrast to the "Information Highway" perspective, this framework emphasizes how data are influenced by virtue of their being communicated within an electronic context. In terms of issues related to privacy, this framework invites a broader approach to the analysis of privacy issues that extends beyond data security (i.e. confidentiality). The analysis of privacy issues within this framework include, but are not limited to, an examination of how computer networks influence the data collection act, how that information is used in making decisions about individuals, and how these relate to the autonomy individuals have in controlling when, how, and to what extent information about them is used.

Table 1 presents the conceptions of the Internet as "Information Highway" versus "Cyberspace", the assumptions underlying each conception, and the implications of each conception for the analysis of privacy issues.
Table 1: Conceptions of Internet as "Information Highway" versus "Cyberspace": Implications for Analysis of Privacy Issues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conception of Internet</th>
<th>&quot;Information Highway&quot;</th>
<th>&quot;Cyberspace&quot;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Underlying Assumptions** | • Internet as technically constructed / hardware
• information is transported from point A to point B | • Internet as social construction
• Internet is constructed and re-constructed by participants
• information is transformed by electronic context |
| **Implications for Analysis of Privacy Issues** | • primary emphasis is on data security / confidentiality / access
• accommodates a market model of privacy in which privacy seen as commodity | • meanings of "public" and "private" are transformed by electronic context
• emphasis includes consideration of data collection act and how information is used
• accommodates a broader, more critical analysis of privacy |

1 It should be noted, though, that the act of subscribing itself makes the mailing list forum a more private "virtual" setting than other forums on the Internet such as newsgroups.
2 Jones implies that an objective researcher stance is both possible and desirable. This is a canon of the positivist paradigm of social research. The naturalistic research paradigm, in contrast, stipulates that the research act is a social one, and that the researcher inevitably influences the object of study. One aspect of the researcher's analytical project, then, is to consider how s/he influences the object of study.
3 For example, overhearing a conversation in a crowded restaurant may be considered public information, whereas that same information in the context of a support group meeting, in which rules for membership and participation are more likely, would be considered private.
4 Advertised as a marketing tool, "Dejanews" is a web site on the Internet that allows interested individuals to search USENET postings (i.e. newsgroup contributions) for e-mail addresses or other items. Using this search engine, one can find out everything a particular individual has ever posted to a newsgroup.
5 Interestingly, within the mailing list of interest to the present study there were more and less private spaces, with the mailing list providing a public forum for exchange and communication, and one-to-one e-mail providing a more private way of communicating with specific others on the mailing list.
Some 'list vendors' or 'information consolidators' even specialize in the types of mailing lists they sell to clients, identifying individuals' political contributions, professions, and fields of study (Gandy, 1993).

Menzies (1996) provides a thorough analysis of the corporate forces driving technological restructuring.

Originally formulated for use as a prison, the "panopticon" was an architectural design that allowed for constant surveillance of all prisoners by one guard. Gandy argues that, by its nature, information technology is "panoptic" because it allows for the surveillance of individuals.

In some cases, the research assistants agreed to give the BBS operators information as to how to maximize their profits in exchange for access to the data.

Only a concise review of those findings that are relevant to the present discussion are presented here. A thorough review of the violations is provided by Jim Thomas (Thomas, 1996).
CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The goal of this thesis was to gain an understanding of the methodological and ethical issues involved in using the Internet to conduct qualitative health research. Specifically, two objectives were addressed. The first research objective was to explore how the use of computer networking technology (i.e. the Internet) influenced the logistics and process of conducting naturalistic, qualitative research with a computer-mediated mutual aid/self-help (MASH) group. The second research objective was to explore how the technology influenced the electronic MASH group as a social setting for research. This subsumed a focused assessment of how the technology influenced participants' experiences of computer-mediated support.

Summary of Findings

The lack of a shared time and space context between researcher and participants had significant ethical and methodological consequences. Methodologically, the medium both facilitated and hindered the research process. The collection of qualitative data in the form of e-mail messages was facilitated by the medium. However, conducting semi-structured interviews was extremely difficult via asynchronous e-mail, resulting in brief responses and a reduced ability to probe for information as compared to face-to-face interviews. Furthermore, while the majority of data was collected as archived e-mail digests, these data did not fully
reflect the meaning of computer-mediated support as experienced by individuals subscribing to the list. Consequently, the ability to generate and verify hypotheses regarding participants' experiences of computer-mediated support on the basis of interview responses alone was limited.

The technology further complicated data analysis and interpretation in terms of its influence on data production and on the meaning of context in electronic groups. In particular, the unique nature of e-mail messages as research data called for a re-thinking of the approach to data analysis, involving a consideration of the extent to which the analytical approach should resemble document analysis and/or participant observation. Secondly, grounding participants' experiences within the natural setting in which they occurred was complicated as it was unclear what should be considered "context" in electronic, text-based social settings. The meaning of context was re-framed by the technology such that context was produced by participants in off topic e-mail messages and by the visual imagery included in e-mail messages. Context was further influenced by the level of formal structure in the group and the "fluidity" with which the social setting was characterized.

While access to e-mail data was facilitated by computer networking technology, what was considered to "public" and "private" in these settings was unclear. Confusion over what was considered "public" and "private" was reflected in participants' varying perceptions over whether the data collection was a legitimate act - while some participants welcomed the study and a chance to participate in it, others refused participation on the basis that it was a violation of
their privacy. In sum, there was a tension between the ease with which the mailing list archives were accessed and participants' perceptions of what was in the public domain.

The lack of a shared time and space context among subscribers in the mailing list had a significant influence on the mutual aid/self-help (MASH) group as a social setting for research. The "fluidity" of the group's boundaries of the mailing list emerged as a central methodological concept and was grounded in observations of the malleability of the mailing list as a social setting for research. A consequence of the unique spatial and temporal referents that characterize asynchronous e-mail communication, this concept of "fluidity" was inducted on the basis of observations relating to staggered (non real-time) social interaction among subscribers, fluctuating group membership, and the ultimate dissolution of the list. "Fluidity" was further enhanced by an informal group structure that did not require active participation (i.e. posting) by subscribers and which allowed subscribers to post and lurk at their own discretion.

The "fluid" boundaries of the list had implications for participants' experiences and for research methodology. Alternative ways of being on the list were made possible by the lack of a shared physical context among subscribers. "Lurking" was a unique state of being for participants of the electronic MASH group and was characterized by the feature of anonymity, a feature that distinguished "lurking" from being silent in face-to-face MASH groups. Furthermore, the lack of a shared time context for interaction among subscribers meant that subscribers were able to access the group when needed. In turn, this was interpreted by participants
as having greater control over their giving and/or receiving support, and over the quitting process in general.

**Implications of Findings for Future Research**

General and specific directives for future research can be made based on the findings of this study. In general, the concept of “fluid” boundaries may be instructive to researchers during the initial stages of the design of research in electronic social settings. Particularly, researchers should consider how “fluid” the boundaries are of the electronic group in which they are interested (i.e. the extent to which the technology allows for anonymous participation independent of time and space considerations), and how this might influence the nature of social interaction in the group. For example, an on-line MASH group that operated in “real” time would require individuals to share the same time context for interaction, and this would result in alternate patterns of social interaction as compared to that observed in the present study. Consequently, the experience of a real-time group would likely differ from a mailing list (non real-time) format since giving, soliciting and receiving support would be dependent on the presence of others within the same time context.

At the outset of one’s study, researchers should also consider how “fluid” group boundaries might influence their research methodology, their ability to perform theoretical sampling, and their subsequent analysis and findings. Also, it would be useful to consider how particular aspects of the group being studied
(structural or otherwise) might enhance or decrease the "fluidity" with which the group is characterized. Using the example provided above, the "fluidity" would inevitably be less than that observed in the present study since the structure of a real-time group requires shared time for social interaction among members (i.e. real-time communication). Using a different example, the observed "fluidity" in the present study would have been more constrained had there been a more formal structure that guided how subscribers used the mailing list (which operates in non real-time). That is, had there been a requirement to post to the group regularly, the ability to move in and out of "lurking", or to remain as a "lurker", would have been limited. This, in turn, would have influenced the findings of this study and the degree to which the analysis could represent a broad range of experiences on the list.

In terms of researcher-participant interaction, researchers should consider how the spatial and temporal referents that structure the researcher-participant relationship alter and transform the logistics of conducting qualitative research (i.e. obtaining informed consent, conducting interviews on-line), the processes by which data are collected and analyzed, as well as the trustworthiness of the interpreted research findings. With regard to the latter aspect, ongoing communication with key informants would be desirable in checking one's interpretations and findings. Also, in the use of e-mail archives or documents, researchers should consider the forces shaping the production of these data (e.g. "fluidity", group culture) and the extent to which these reflect what they seek to know. As discussed in Chapter Six, the e-mail archives were limited in the extent to which they reflected the range of experiences
of the mailing list. In this case, conducting interviews added significantly to the analysis of participants' experiences.

From an ethical perspective, the findings of this study indicated that it is possible to obtain informed consent from members of electronic groups via e-mail. In keeping with Schrum's recommendations, gaining entry and obtaining informed consent should be planned carefully and supported by a gatekeeper (e.g. list owner or other administrator) (Schrum, 1995). In the case where archives are being used, researchers need to consider how they will use data contributed by individuals who do not return a completed consent form.

Although computer networking technology facilitates the collection of e-mail data from remote locations, this potentially increases the researcher's ability to collect data unknowingly from individuals who participate in electronic groups. In this way, the Internet can act a figurative one way mirror through which the researcher can observe social interaction while remaining "invisible" to those being studied. Because of this, researchers need to consider carefully, and clearly articulate, the methods by which they will obtain informed consent and protect the privacy of their research participants. Furthermore, the Internet provides increased access to some stigmatized or otherwise hard to reach groups. This has ethical implications for data collection, for these groups are most at risk of being studied. The ethical issues of conducting research on marginalized groups via the Internet are especially important for the collective misuse of information from such research can be used to cast negative social images and to inform social policy (as in the Rimm "Cyberporn" Study). Thus, in addition to the protection of participants'
privacy, researchers should also consider the propriety of the data collection act itself and the mechanism by which they will attempt to verify the conclusions of their research so that they do not misrepresent the perceptions and behaviours of those being studied.

Guidelines outlining the ethical use of networked information for the purposes of conducting research should be shaped by policies developed by academic ethics review committees, and by policy makers concerned with the uses of new communication technologies. The need for guidelines in this area calls for critical reflection, and a growing dialogue, on how "privacy" as a concept is transformed under electronic conditions. As discussed in the previous chapter, the framing of "privacy" solely as an issue of data security is driven by market forces and reduces the personal autonomy over the control of the flow of personal information. To help ensure that policies developed to protect privacy are not driven by market forces, key stakeholders in public and private sectors should be identified and involved in the decision-making process (e.g. Ontario Privacy Commissioner).

The development of policies to guide researchers using computer-networked information is timely as applications of information and communication technologies in health care are developed and implemented (e.g. as part of the National Health Information Infrastructure). In 1995, the Information Highway Advisory Council released their final report including recommendations in fifteen public policy areas. Interestingly, in their recommendations on privacy protection, the tension between increased access to networked data and the meaning of privacy in electronic
contexts is implicitly acknowledged and is resolved in favour of preserving access by researchers to computer-networked health information:

Emerging policies to protect privacy should recognize the public benefits of access to data for health, health policy and social science research, and should preserve legitimate research opportunities.

Recognizing that obtaining individual consent is not always feasible nor desirable, researchers should develop a process for notifying, involving, educating and insuring the public about the objectives of research projects, thereby making transparent the manner in which public health sector databases are collected, managed, accessed, retained, disposed, linked and analyzed, while maintaining confidentiality.

(Industry Canada, 1995), p.147

The new forms of social interaction made possible by computer networking technology provide direction for research in the area of self-help and mutual aid. First, given the unique ability to "lurk" in (some) electronic MASH groups, future research should be directed towards gaining an understanding of the extent to which electronic MASH groups represent an alternative or a complement to face-to-face MASH groups. Second, given the ability to control the timing over giving and receiving support in asynchronous electronic groups, it would be useful to investigate how the non real-time electronic format might be particularly suited to particular problems. In this study, the ability to solicit support when experiencing an "urge" to smoke was a key factor in how participants used the list. This suggests that the increased ability to control one's participation in asynchronous electronic groups may be particularly useful for the alleviation of substance use problems that involve learning how to control and overcome the experience of urges. Finally, the present findings suggest that future research should be directed towards gaining an understanding of how electronic contexts transform the processes that are known to
characterize mutual aid/self-help. Specifically, the unidirectional nature of "lurking" (i.e. reading but not posting) is in direct opposition to the bidirectional nature of support-giving and receiving that is a fundamental feature of face-to-face MASH groups. While an investigation of the benefits and experience of "lurking" would be worthy, it may be difficult to yield information from "lurkers". That is, for the same reasons that these individuals decide to "lurk", they may be the least likely to disclose in-depth information about their experiences of computer-mediated MASH groups.

To conclude, computer-networked groups represent exciting new sites of investigation for qualitative researchers interested in contemporary uses of communication technologies. However, these sites do not represent new databases that can be analyzed through an uncritical transference of methodological and ethical concepts used in traditional, face-to-face qualitative research. Rather, the medium transforms the nature of the object of inquiry, as well as the processes by which researchers come to understand and know the object of inquiry. As a result, using the Internet to conduct qualitative research in electronic social settings necessitates a re-consideration of central issues in qualitative research.
**APPENDIX A: QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE PARADIGM ASSUMPTIONS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assumption</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Quantitative</th>
<th>Qualitative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ontological Assumption</td>
<td>What is the nature of reality?</td>
<td>Reality is objective and singular, apart from the researcher.</td>
<td>Reality is subjective and multiple as seen by participants in a study.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epistemological Assumption</td>
<td>What is the relationship of the researcher to that researched?</td>
<td>Researcher is independent from that being researched.</td>
<td>Researcher interacts with that being researched.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Axiological Assumption</td>
<td>What is the role of values?</td>
<td>Value-free and unbiased.</td>
<td>Value-laden and biased.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhetorical Assumption</td>
<td>What is the language of research?</td>
<td>Formal Based on set definitions Impersonal voice Use of accepted quantitative words</td>
<td>Informal Evolving decisions Personal voice Accepted qualitative words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodological Assumption</td>
<td>What is the process of research?</td>
<td>Deductive process Cause and effect Static design categories isolated before study Context-free Generalizations leading to prediction, explanation, and understanding Accurate and reliable through validity and reliability</td>
<td>Inductive process Mutual simultaneous shaping of factors Emerging design-categories identified during research process Context-bound patterns, theories developed for understanding Accurate and reliable through verification</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: (Creswell, 1994)
APPENDIX C: SAMPLE OF "REPOST"

*From Lucia Mon Jan 1 02:00:40 CST 1996, Subject: lucia's repost 1

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Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

for

XXX . XXXXXXXXXX . XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX (X.X.X-X)

Last Updated: April 5, 1995

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"The sublimity of WISDOM is to do those things living, which are desired when dying" - unknown "Our belief at the beginning of a doubtful undertaking is the one thing that assures the successful outcome of any venture" - William James

"What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us" - Ralph W. Emerson

"Why so sad and woebegone? Will the world not heed you? Courage! Even you have won friends you may rely upon when they really need you" - Piet Hein

This posting contains a list of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) and their answers about smoking as well as various tips for quitting and staying smoke-free. The FAQ is posted to the XXX.XXXXXXX.XXXX-XXXXXXX (X.X.X-X) newsgroup once per week (typically Sunday) but is also available via e-mail on request. Most of the material in this FAQ has been condensed from posts which originally appeared on the X.X.X-X newsgroup and is based PRIMARILY on information from the PERSONAL EXPERIENCES of the individuals in this newsgroup. Some excerpts and extractions from various related books and publications may also be randomly included in this FAQ. Forward questions or comment via e-mail to:

Barry X. XXXXXXX

Keeper of the FAQ

-------------------

<snip>
6. What is the best method for quitting?

The method(s) an individual uses to help them quit smoking is a matter best left up to that individual and their doctor. Many people prefer one method of quitting over another, and most have had to try several different ways or techniques before finding a suitable method.

THREE of the more common methods used by those within this group are NICOTINE-based PATCHES, NICOTINE-based GUM, and plain and simple COLD TURKEY. The PATCH provides a constant release of NICOTINE throughout its life. The GUM allows you to have more control over the dosage. As things get tough, you can pop a piece in to get almost instant relief. Some people have even used both the PATCH and the GUM.

COLD TURKEY is generally not recommended unless one is FULLY PREPARED as it can be extremely difficult, taking a great deal of willpower. However, COLD TURKEY can also be a very quick and effective method as well. The best thing one can do is to consult with their family doctor and see what they recommend. However, experience in this group has shown time and again that none of the methods are effective unless YOU WANT TO QUIT SMOKING! Your desire is the MOST important ingredient in the process.

7. How can I prepare for quitting?

The best way to prepare to quit smoking is to set up a PLAN. This could include any one of the following suggestions, although you may wish to alter some to suit your own personal needs. Suggestions from X.X.X-X group members include:

- Set a QUIT DATE!!! You should try to set the date around a stress-free time, although there is NO perfect time as there will always be bad times such as exams, tax time, holidays, vacations, parties, etc.;

- If you plan on using the PATCH or GUM and you require a prescription to get it, or if you wish to try hypnosis, for example, set up a doctors appointment for yourself;

- Gather all the information you can on quitting including tips, motivational material, self-help books, etc.;

- Join a support group such as this group or Smokers Anonymous;
- Look into restarting an old hobby or perhaps starting a new one such as joining the gym or taking an aerobics class and getting into shape - the idea here is to keep busy, exercise, and breath smoke-free air!

- When the quit day actually arrives, get rid of all remaining cigarettes and related items such as ashtrays, lighters, and matches - you might even try cleaning the ashtrays and using them for candy dishes :) 

- Try to keep a positive frame of mind ... nobody ever died from quitting smoking ... PROMISE!!

8. Why is quitting so difficult ?

Quitting smoking will be one of the hardest things that you will ever do. This is primarily because smoking is actually a three-fold problem: it is a psychological, social, and physical ADDICTION to the drug NICOTINE. Before you quit smoking, all your emotions were medicated with a cigarette: you relaxed with NICOTINE; you laughed with NICOTINE; you wept with NICOTINE; and you digested with NICOTINE - just to name a few.

NICOTINE was your last drug before you slept and your first when you awoke. No wonder that, suddenly deprived of all that, your psyche goes into overdrive for a little while. Without NICOTINE, ex-smokers are suddenly forced to deal with situations on their own. This can be a difficult task but the important thing to remember is that THINGS WILL GET BETTER as an ex-smoker finds new ways of handling old situations.

9. Why am I having sleeping problems ?

You are going through one of the symptoms of NICOTINE withdrawal. Some people have difficulty sleeping while others can never seem to get enough sleep. Group members have found that one of the best things a person can do if they are experiencing sleep difficulties is to reduce or eliminate your caffeine intake temporarily. Many have found an additional connection between caffeine and cravings, so in this regard you may be helping to stop two problems at once. Starting an exercise program should also help you sleep better. In the case of not getting enough sleep, many have found success in trying to take a nap when and where ever possible. REMEMBER, this condition is only TEMPORARY as your body is adjusting to and healing from the absence of the NICOTINE.
10. How will the physical withdrawal last?

Physical withdrawals, as described above, are said to last anywhere from 48 hours to TWO weeks. This can vary from person to person depending on the amount that you smoked and your psychological make-up. Many in the group have found the physical effects typically last between 3 to 7 days.

11. I tried the NICORETTE GUM and was pretty happy with the results, but, the GUM for some reason really bothered by stomach?

The package directions for NICORETTE GUM suggests that you should chew a piece with small chews every minute or so. The package also states most of the NICOTINE will be released within the first thirty minutes. If you chew NICORETTE like regular GUM before the NICOTINE is released, this could and probably will, upset your stomach. Note that after the 30 minutes you can treat it as regular GUM and chew as often or as vigorously as you want.

12. Why do I dream more using the PATCH?

The general consensus of the group on this one is that: As a smoker your sleep state is or was not as deep as it is now. This is probably due to difficulties in breathing, etc. With a deeper state of sleep you are able to dream and with the addition of the PATCH overnight, you may experience increased or more vivid dreams. While the exact reason for having more vivid dreams while using is PATCH is not know, it is a very normal and very common experience within the group.

13. Can't I have just one last one?

Like with any ADDICTION, smoking is something that should be given up completely. It is not safe to smoke even a single cigarette as this could send you right back to smoking as much or EVEN MORE than you did prior to quitting. It's just not safe. Remember - _ You're only a puff away from a Pack-A-Day_.

14. What can I do to encourage someone who is trying to quit?

- Do NOT pester someone who is trying to quit smoking or who is in the initial stages of thinking about quitting as it is probably the worst thing someone trying to offer support can
do -- also do NOT nag, insult, o attempt to shame a smoker into quitting;

- Let your spouse/friend/roommate know that no matter what happens that you value them as a person (even though you may disapprove of their smoking) and that you respect them for trying to break free from their addiction;

- Learn to listen non-judgmentally and attempt to understand and see the problems of quitting a powerful and seductive addiction through the smoker's eyes;

- REMEMBER to praise a smoker for even the smallest effort in trying to quit or cut down -- quitting is a process and it takes time!

15. Just how am I harming my body by smoking ?

EVERY CIGARETTE YOU SMOKE HARMs YOUR BODY - simple as that! A better analogy might be to suppose you lived near a chemical plant that emitted a number of toxic wastes that had seeped into the town's drinking water, so that every time you took a drink of water, it did a SMALL but definite amount of damage to your body. After you had lived there for a few years, you might notice that you did not have quite as much energy as you used to. After five or ten years, you might notice that quite a few of the townspeople seemed to be getting ill with one thing or another. In the same way, every cigarette you smoke damages your body. Smoking is a SILENT and PATIENT killer. In simple terms, the more you smoke, the greater the damage you do to your body and to those around you who breath your second hand smoke too!

FOR YOUR INFORMATION:
----------------------------------
- LUNG CANCER risk increases roughly 50 to 100 percent for each cigarette you smoke per day;

- HEART DISEASE risk increases roughly 100 percent for each pack of cigarettes you smoke per day;

- Switching to filter-tip cigarettes reduces the risk of LUNG CANCER roughly 20 percent, but does NOT affect the risk of HEART DISEASE;

- Smokers spend 27 percent MORE time in the hospital and more than TWICE as much time in intensive care units as nonsmokers;

- Each cigarette costs the smoker 5 to 20 minutes of life;
- A smoker is at TWICE the risk of dying before age 65 as a non-smoker!!

16. How does death from smoking compare to other causes?

The statistics which follow were obtained from an American Cancer Society pamphlet and are for 1993.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cause of Death</th>
<th>Number per Year (U.S.A. only)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol related</td>
<td>105,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Car accidents</td>
<td>49,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suicide</td>
<td>31,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aids</td>
<td>31,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murder</td>
<td>22,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fire</td>
<td>4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cocaine</td>
<td>3,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heroin/Morphine</td>
<td>2,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (of above)</td>
<td>247,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cause of Death</th>
<th>Number per Year (U.S.A. only)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Tobacco only)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Tobacco related</td>
<td>434,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

17. What is METASTASIS?

METASTASIS is defined as the transfer of a disease-producing agency from the site of the disease to another part of the body. One of the mortal threats of cancer is METASTASIS. Early detection of cancer can be the difference between life and death. Most cancers can be detection at an early stage mainly because of physical symptoms such as lumps, bleeding, or some other clue.

UNFORTUNATELY there are two types of cancer in which early detection is highly unlikely: LUNG CANCER and PANCREATIC CANCER. By a dint of bad luck, if an individual has one of these two cancers, they will probably not know it until the disease has invaded other vital organs and parts of their body. By this time it may be too late for any meaningful treatment or cure.
The five-year survival rate for PANCREATIC CANCER is 5% and for LUNG CANCER is 10%. This compares with a survival rate of 50-80% for most other cancers. Why has this information been reproduced in this FAQ. Simply to help provide motivation for those of you who have either quit or are trying to quit. CIGARETTE SMOKING is has appeared as a major cause of both these two malignant cancers.

18. What if I quit ... will I ever get better?

Smoking cessation has major and immediate health benefits for men and women of all ages. These benefits apply to people with and without smoking-related diseases.

Within 20 minutes of your last cigarette:
~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~
- blood pressure drops to normal
- pulse drops to its normal rate
- body temperature of your hands and feet increases to normal

Within 8 hours:
~~~~~~~~~~~~~~
- carbon monoxide level in your blood drops to normal
- oxygen level in your blood increases to normal

Within twenty-four hours:
~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~
- chance of heart attack decreases

Within forty-eight hours:
~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~
- nerve endings start regrowing
- your abilities to smell and taste things are enhanced

Within seventy-two hours:
~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~
- bronchial tubes relax, making breathing easier
- lung capacity increases

Within two weeks to three months:
~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~
- circulation improves and walking becomes easier
- lung function increases by up to 30 percent

Within one to nine months:
~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~
- coughing, sinus congestion, fatigue, shortness of breath decreases
- cilia regrow in lungs, increasing ability to handle mucus, clean the lungs, and reduce infection
- the body's overall energy level increases

Five years:

- lung cancer death rate for average ex-smoker decreases from 137 per 100,000 people to 72 per 100,000 (... almost half!)

Ten years:

- lung cancer death rate for average ex-smoker drops to 12 deaths per 100,000 (... almost the rate for a non-smokers and a full order of magnitude less than a smoker)
- pre-cancerous cells are replaced
- other cancer rates (e.g., mouth, larynx, esophagus, bladder, kidney and pancreas decrease as well

In addition:

- ex-smokers tend to live longer than continuing smokers
- smoking cessation decreases the risk of lung cancer, other cancers, heart attack, stroke, and chronic lung disease
- women who stop smoking before pregnancy or during the first three to four months reduce their risk of having sickly babies, as compared to women who continue to smoke

19. I've smoked for so many years, what's the point of quitting?

LOTS! A new study PROVES for the first time that smokers who quit wind up with healthier lungs, NO MATTER HOW LONG THEY'VE SMOKED.

The study involved more than 5,800 smokers who were victims of chronic obstructive lung disease, a combination of emphysema and bronchitis (the fourth leading cause of death IN THE U.S.A.).

THE STUDY WAS THE FIRST PROOF THAT IF YOU STOP SMOKING AT ANY AGE, YOU WILL HAVE HEALTHIER LUNGS.

It was the largest study ever conducted on the prevention of lung disease and showed without a doubt that quitting smoking is the most effective way of preventing lung function decline.
So there you have it, conclusive proof that it is worth quitting no matter how old you are or how long you have smoked for.

20. Where can I get list of archived material compiled by the X.X.X-X newsgroup and available on request FREE of charge?

The list which follows contains memorable postings which have been archived in order to provide newbies (and others) access to past postings. Each archived posting is available via e-mail request.

- "Diary of an Ex-Smoker" - By Rachel Altman
- "Fired Up to Quit: Seeing a Way Through that Nasty Smoking Habit" - By Rachel Altman
- Hope For All
- Herbal Teas
- Non-Nicotine Stop-smoking Aid?
- Sharon At Ten Years (January 15, 1985 - January 15, 1995)
- Weekend Relapse
- Cigarette Company Mentality
- Coping With Second Hand Smoke
- Off-the-cuff Ex-smoker's Accounting Rules
- Hang Tuff, Don't Puff! (Poem)
- Helping The Depression-Prone To Quit Smoking
- Inside A Smoker's Body Eyes, Nose, Throat
- It's All In The State Of Mind (Poem)
- Junkie Thinking
- Key Points For Success
- Confronting Your Addiction (Five Steps)
- Merchants of Death
- More Cigarette Company Mentality
- My Blue Print For Happiness
- Patch Of Advice
- Put Your Butt Out Forever
- Smoking Facts
- Some Smoking Health Hazards
- Struggle To Win Smoke-free Living
- Tips For Quitters
- Top Ten Reasons to Quit Smoking
- Blue Flower To Aid Stopping Smoking?
- Panic Attacks
- Who Me ... Stop Smoking Again?
- Coping with Urges
- Quitting Smoking: Common Errors
- Researcher Finds Better Way To Stop Smoking
21. Is it true X.X.X-X has a WWW page?

YES! X.X.X-X now has a home page on the worldwide web (www). This gives the group GLOBAL exposure and recognition. Special thanks to Nigel for building and maintaining the X.X.X-X WWW home page. If you would like to have a look, and you have access to the web, the URL is:

"http://XXX.XXX.XX.XX/~XXXX/".

22. Are there other related groups or information sources?

XXXXXXXXX - E-Mail List

~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~

XXXXXXXXX is an e-mail support list for people recovering from addiction to cigarettes. Anybody with an interest in quitting smoking or in helping others quit is encouraged to participate in the discussion.

This e-mail list is running on Unix ListProcessor version 6.0a. Messages sent to: "XXXX-XXXX@XXXXXXX.XXX" will be automatically distributed to all subscribers. Commands related to your subscription should be sent to: "XXXXX@XXXXXXX.XXX", not to the list itself. Here are a few useful commands:

- subscribe XXXXXXXXX [Your Name]

- unsubscribe XXXXXXXXX

- set XXXXXXXXX mail ack
  (The default setting of listproc is not to send you copies of your own list postings. If you want to receive them, you must send the 'mail ack' command.)

- set XXXXXXXXX mail noack
  (This command reverses the 'ack' command.)

- set XXXXXXXXX mail postpone
  (The word "postpone" is misleading in this command. If you send the 'mail postpone' command, you are not postponing delivery of list mail. The mail does not accumulate. It vanishes. You can reverse the 'mail postpone' command by sending the 'mail ack' command.)

- set XXXXXXXXX mail digest
  (New messages aren't sent to you immediately but are accumulated into digests to be sent to you periodically.)

- review XXXXXXXXX (This command sends you a list of all subscribers.)

- help
(For more information, send this command to listproc.)

If you have any questions, feel free to write to Natalie Maynor,
Mississippi State University, via e-mail at: " ".

HABITSMART:
~~~~~~~~~~~
This www site contains information on coping with urges and
 cravings, smoke reduction, and memory model of addictive
 behavior. A new issue of "The Archivist", a newsletter
 presenting recent trends in addiction research, includes
 information on motivation and change, and a new Harm
 Reduction page containing articles pertaining to harm
 reduction philosophy and related issues such as controlled
drinking, methadone maintenance, outreach, diet and more.
Comments and contributions encouraged!
The URL is: "http://www.cts.com:80/~habtsmrt/". For further
information, please contact: Robert XXXXXXXX at:
"XXXXXXXX@XXX.XXX".

SELF-HELP PSYCHOLOGY MAGAZINE
(formerly Practical Psychology Magazine):
~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~
Self-Help Psychology Magazine is a general psychology
publication dedicated to the art of living well - off the net.
They carry various types of information and services, which
include a full department on Addictions (including nicotine).
The Executive Editor of the magazine happens to be a
nationally-known researcher and trainer for professionals who
work with nicotine in their medical/ psychotherapeutic/
fitness/or industrial settings. Articles are posted monthly,
and are in an easily-read, "how-to" format. Your feedback is
strongly encouraged. Free resource listings and other
materials are available for the Internet user. The WWW URL
is:

"http://xxx.xxx.xxx/xxx/xxxxxxxxxx".

23. Some closing (but not final) thoughts:

"SMOKING is a chronic DISEASE and QUITTING is a PROCESS.
Relapse and remission are part of the process. As long as
you're continuing to make progress toward the ultimate goal of
being SMOKE-FREE, YOU should feel GOOD about your
ACHIEVEMENT." --Psychology Today Magazine.
APPENDIX D:  QUIT LIST

*From Linda Mon Jan  1 01:00:38 CST 1996, Subject: Quit List
Happy New Year everyone!
If you want to be on the list, please let me know.
Please make or send me additions and/or corrections.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<tr>
<td>Mar? 93</td>
<td>Natalie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Jan 95</td>
<td>Lorraine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 Apr 95</td>
<td>Tim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 May 95</td>
<td>Lucia (she of the reposts)</td>
</tr>
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<td>20 July 95</td>
<td>Victoria (Torie)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 Aug 95</td>
<td>Natalie (Natasha)</td>
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<td>25 Aug 95</td>
<td>Michele (Empathy)</td>
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<td>15 Oct 95</td>
<td>Blair, Tonya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>MoMouser (Mo)</td>
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<td>20 Dec 95</td>
<td>Terri</td>
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Dear XXXXXX:

I am writing to request your support to study the XXXXXXXX listserv. My name is Jessica Polzer and I am completing a Master's degree in Behavioural Science at the University of Toronto under the supervision of Dr. Harvey Skinner, who you know as a subscriber to the XXXXXXXX list. Harvey introduced me to the concept of electronic self-help/support groups in September of 1994. As a result, I have become interested in learning more about support groups available on the Internet.

Before I describe the study, I would like to share with you some personal history that I feel has influenced my interest to pursue this area of research. My previous experience with support and self-help groups occurred when a close relative was diagnosed with Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS, Lou Gehrig's Disease). As a result, I became involved in starting a local chapter of the ALS Society. This group became a place where people with ALS, as well as their significant others, came to discuss problems and issues, listen to guest speakers, and support one another in dealing with the various aspects of this terminal illness. Through my involvement with this group I became aware of the empowering effects that support groups can have by providing an environment where individuals can discuss and share their common experiences and concerns, form new friendships, and become involved in social functions and group activities.

Why Study XXXXXXXX? From Harvey's descriptions of his experiences as a subscriber to the XXXXXXXX listserv, and from very brief observations that I have had of the interactions in this group, I would be very interested in learning more about this support group. It seems to me that this list has developed a unique culture, and provides a supportive atmosphere for people attempting to quit smoking. As an ex-smoker myself, I can truly understand how difficult it is to give up smoking for good! All in all, I believe that studying XXXXXXXX would lend valuable insight about the phenomenon of electronic support groups. Furthermore, I feel that this will contribute to a more general understanding of how the Internet is currently being used by individuals to connect with others, and to form relationships and communities around common interests.

Goal of Research and Personal Benefits: The purpose of the proposed study will be to gain a greater understanding of computer-mediated support groups. In particular, I am interested in exploring how on-line support groups are experienced by the individuals who participate in them. By conducting this study I will fulfill a thesis research requirement for my Master of Science degree. In addition, findings from the study will be written up in the form of academic papers and disseminated to appropriate academic journals for possible publication.

What would the research involve? Below is a plan that outlines how I see the research unfolding. Given your familiarity with the XXXXXXXX listserv, I would value any feedback you have about the research plan.
The Research Process

1. Request support for research from list administrator.

2. If list administrator supports the research, an introductory e-mail message will be posted to the group in order to request permission to conduct the research and to get any feedback regarding the research. This note will explicitly state that the study would involve observing and recording the interactions within the XXXXXXXX group during a specified two month period (phase 1), and conducting interviews with selected subscribers (phase 2). The note will also include information regarding: why I am interested in doing the study; the goals of the research; the ends to which the research findings will be put; the rights of XXXXXXXX members as research participants; the measures that will be taken to protect the anonymity of participants. This note will also inform subscribers that I will contact them again to request their participation in the research. The e-mail addresses and telephone numbers of both myself and my academic advisor will be included in case anyone wishes to bring forth and discuss any questions, concerns and/or feedback they have about the study.

3. XXXXXXXX subscribers will be re-contacted and will be asked for their participation in the research. This note will be similar to the original note posted to the list (see #2). A consent form will be attached to this note and subscribers will be asked to complete and return the consent form if they agree to take part in the study (see end of this letter for a sample consent form). Subscribers agreeing to take part in the study will be given the option of receiving consent forms through regular mail. The e-mail addresses and telephone numbers of myself and Dr. Skinner will be included in this note so that subscribers' questions and concerns can be communicated and addressed.

Non-respondents will be re-contacted through private e-mail and requested for their participation in the study.

4. Consent to participate in the research will be obtained from volunteers (see below).

5. There are two kinds of information that I will be interested in obtaining from the XXXXXXXX listserv. This data will be collected in two phases.

   Phase One: The first phase of the research will involve observing how the XXXXXXXX list operates by keeping a record of the e-mail sent to the XXXXXXXX mailing list for two consecutive months. Using a time span of two months should allow me to get a good sense of the spectrum of issues relevant to the group. Any e-mail of individuals not wishing to participate in the research (i.e., not returning a completed consent form) will be deleted from the record such that only the e-mail of those subscribers consenting to take part in the study will remain.

   The remaining record will be analyzed by assessing and describing typical events and topics of discussion that occur in the group. In this way, I will be able to get a clearer sense of the nature and culture of the XXXXXXXX list.

   Phase Two: The second phase of the research will involve conducting semi-structured interviews with XXXXXXXX members selected during the first phase of the study. Interviews will be requested from those members who are highly interactive in the group, those who have gained recognition from other members of the group, and those who are not particularly active subscribers. This will help to maximize variation in respondents' experiences.
Interviews will be conducted through personal e-mail and will focus on gaining insight about individuals' experiences as XXXXXXX members. The interviews will be used as a means to clarify and further explore themes that emerge from the first phase of the study. Thus, the focus of the research will become more specific during the second phase.

The previously distributed consent forms will inform participants that they may be requested to take part in an interview at a later date. The consent forms will also review participants' rights as interview respondents (see sample consent form). Those agreeing to an interview will initially be sent a list of topics and will be asked to respond to each topic. Respondents will then be re-contacted and asked additional questions in order to clarify or pursue further points raised in their original commentary.

6. Themes or hypotheses that arise during the study will be checked with XXXXXXX respondents who will be asked for feedback about these ideas. This will help ensure that the researcher's interpretations are a trustworthy representation of how the XXXXXXX list is experienced by its members.

7. Once the study has been entirely completed, a summary of the research findings will be made available to respondents in many formats (e.g., electronic, hard copy).

Obtaining Informed Consent:

*From Current XXXXXXX Subscribers:* Volunteers will have the option of receiving consent forms through e-mail or through regular mail. Those receiving forms through e-mail will provide consent by printing a copy of the form, signing their name in the appropriate spot, and returning the completed form to me via regular mail at a provided address. For those receiving consent forms through regular mail, a self-addressed, stamped envelope will be provided for returning the signed consent form. All returned consent forms will also be signed by me, acknowledging my obligations as a researcher, and a copy will be sent to each participant via regular mail. All street and e-mail addresses of the XXXXXXX subscribers will be kept strictly confidential.

*From Newcomers:* I feel that it will be necessary to inform newcomers of the study during the two-month period in which interactions are being recorded (phase 1). Perhaps new subscribers to the list could be informed of the ongoing research by appending a note to the introductory welcome message that they receive once they have joined the list. A summary of the information previously posted to the listserv (see #2 and #3 above) would be included in this note, as well as a statement by the list administrator acknowledging that she has reviewed and approved of the study. (Please let me know how you would feel about doing this).

A consent form will be appended to the introductory message and newcomers will be invited to participate in the study. Newcomers will also have the opportunity to air any concerns they have about the research by contacting either myself or Dr. Skinner using the communication channels provided in the introductory message. Newcomers not responding will be requested to participate in the research through private e-mail (see step #4 above). Informed consent will be obtained from new subscribers using the same procedures as that for current subscribers.
Ethical Considerations
Please note that ethical issues will be treated with the utmost concern. The introductory notes to XXXXXXXX subscribers will inform them that their participation in the study is completely voluntary and will outline the measures that will be taken to protect their anonymity. Also, the consent form will include a detailed description of the subscribers’ rights as research participants. In addition, ethics guidelines outlining the responsibilities of researchers studying groups in electronic settings will be included in the consent form (see appended form).

The proposal outlining the study will have to be approved by an official Ethics Review Board at the University of Toronto prior to the beginning of research. The purpose of this ethics review is to ensure that participants’ rights of confidentiality, freedom from coercion, anonymity, and their freedom to withdraw are protected. Finally, all information obtained during the study will be stored and locked in a cabinet and destroyed after five years. This is consistent with current practices in social research.

I would be grateful for any comments, concerns, and/or feedback that you have regarding any aspect/s of the study I have proposed. Thank you for your kind consideration. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,
Jessica Polzer

Department of Behavioural Science, Faculty of Medicine
University of Toronto
Toronto, Ontario
Canada
M5S 1A8
E-mail: j.polzer@utoronto.ca; tel: (416) 657-1740
SELF-HELP BY ELECTRONIC MAIL
AN INVESTIGATION OF PERCEPTIONS AND MEANINGS OF COMPUTER-MEDIATED SUPPORT COMMUNITIES

Consent Form

- I understand that the purpose of the above named study is to explore how individuals experience computer-mediated support groups available on the Internet. I also understand that the focus of the study may become more specific as the study proceeds.

- I understand that my participation in the study is voluntary and that I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. At any point during the study, I can contact the researcher to request that any information I have provided not be included in the study.

- As a participant in the study, I understand that there will be two phases. In the first phase, I understand that the e-mail I contribute to the XXXXXXXX listserv will be recorded by the researcher for a two month period (e.g., from March 1 to May 1 1996). If, for any reason, I do not want some of my e-mail included from the study, I understand that I can “flag” certain messages as “off the record” by typing “OTR*” in the subject line. This marker will notify the researcher to exclude that particular e-mail from the study.

- I understand that the second phase of the study will involve the researcher interviewing XXXXXXXX subscribers through personal e-mail. I understand that I may be requested to give a personal interview and that I am not obligated to agree to an interview, even if I have taken part in the first phase of the study. If I do agree to take part in an interview, I understand that I will be asked questions or asked to comment on my experiences as a member of the XXXXXXXX listserv. I understand that I can refuse to answer any questions or comment on any topics that I feel are too personal. Also, I understand that I can terminate the interview at any time during the interview.

- I understand that my identity will be kept in complete confidence and will be known to only the researcher, Jessica Polzer. I understand that any information I give during either phase of the study will be used anonymously by removing any identifying elements from the e-mail transcripts (e.g., name, e-mail address, listserv name). Thus, I will not be identified in any reports of this study. I further understand that any information I provided that identifies me by its content (that is, after removing usual identifiers) will be used in written reports only with my permission.

- I understand that any questions, comments, or concerns I have regarding the study can be directed to: Jessica Polzer at: j.polzer@utoronto.ca or (416) 657-1740 or to Dr. Harvey Skinner at: harvey.skinner@utoronto.ca or (416) 978-8989.

I have read my rights as a research participant in the study “Self-help by electronic mail: An investigation of perceptions and meanings of computer-mediated support communities”. I understand these rights and I agree to take part in this study.

Signature of Participant: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________
Responsibilities of Researcher

As the primary researcher in the above-named study, I, Jessica Polzer, understand that I have the following obligations and responsibilities as outlined by the Ethical Electronic Research Guidelines (from Schrum (1995). Framing the debate: Ethical research in the information age. *Qualitative Inquiry, 1*(3), 311-325).

- Researchers must begin with an understanding of the basic tenets for conducting ethical qualitative research.
- Researchers should consider the respondents and participants as owners of the materials that are created; the respondents should have the ability to modify or correct statements for spelling, substance, or language.
- Researchers need to describe in detail the goals of the research, the purposes to which the results will be put, plans of the researcher to protect participants, and recourse open to those who feel mistreated.
- Researchers should strive to create a climate of trust, collaboration, and equality with electronic community members, within an environment that is nonevaluative and safe.
- Researchers should negotiate their entry into an electronic community, beginning with the owner of the discussion, if one exists. After gaining entry, they should make their presence known in any electronic community (e.g., a listserv, specialized discussion group, or electronic class format) as frequently as necessary to inform all participants of their presence and engagement in electronic research.
- Researchers should treat electronic mail as private correspondence that is not to be forwarded or shared with others unless express permission is given, except for the inclusion of anonymous quotes in the research.
- Researchers have an obligation to begin by informing participants as much as possible about the purposes, activities, benefits, and burdens that may result from their being studied.
- Researchers must inform participants as to any risks that might result from their agreeing to be part of the study - especially psychological or social risks.
- Researchers must respect the identity of the members of the community, with special efforts to mask the origins of the communication, unless express permission to use identifying information is given.
- Researchers must be aware of the steep learning curve for electronic communications. Information about the research should be placed in a variety of accessible formats.
- Researchers have an obligation to the electronic community in which they work and participate to communicate back the results of their work.

I, Jessica Polzer, have read and understand my responsibilities as a researcher in the study "Self-help by electronic mail: An investigation of perceptions and meanings of computer-mediated support communities". I agree to uphold these principles at all times during the study.

Signature of Researcher: __________________________ Date: __________________________
Thank you for your participation in this study. Your contribution is greatly appreciated. Do not hesitate to contact myself, Jessica Polzer, or my academic advisor, Dr. Harvey skinner, at the addresses provided on the consent form if you have any questions or concerns regarding the study.

PLEASE SIGN AND DATE THE ENCLOSED CONSENT FORM AND RETURN THE COMPLETED FORM TO ADDRESS PROVIDED BELOW.

If you received this form via regular mail: Please sign in the space provided above and return the completed form to the address provided on the stamped, enclosed envelope.
If you received this form via e-mail: Please print a copy of this consent form, sign your name in the space provided above, return the completed form to the address provided below.

Please Return to: Jessica Polzer
Department of Behavioural Science
McMurrich Building
University of Toronto
Toronto, Ontario
Canada
M5S 1A8

A copy of this form will be returned to you once the researcher has signed. In the space provided below, please indicate the address where you would like the form returned.

Return the completed consent form to me at:

If you would like to receive a summary of the results of the study once it has been completed, please indicate in the space provided below where you would like the summary sent. You may receive the summary at your street address or your e-mail address depending on your preference.

Send a copy of the summary of the study results to me at:
APPENDIX F: LETTER OF SUPPORT FOR RESEARCH

From: XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
Date: Wed, 7 Feb 1996 13:52:07 -0500
Subject: re: permission to do research
To: j.polzer@utoronto.ca

The description of your project is excellent. You seem to have thought it all through thoroughly and dealt with questions of ethics/permissions quite well.

I'll be happy to append some kind of message for newcomers if you decide that's what you'd like to do. Or I could send you the new-subscriber messages I get from listproc if you'd prefer to get in touch with them directly. Either way is fine with me.
APPENDIX G: CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS & CONSENT FORM

Hello there :)

My name is Jessica Polzer and I am a graduate student in Community Health at the University of Toronto, Canada. I am writing this letter to request your participation in a retrospective study of the xxxxxxxx mailing list.

In February, I contacted Natalie Maynor to request her support for a study of the xxxxxxxx list and she responded with her support for the study. In my original proposal, I had hoped that the xxxxxxxx list would still be in operation and that Natalie could forward this message to you on my behalf. However, in late March, Natalie e-mailed me and informed that the mailing list would be changing to the ‘xxxxxxx’ list. At that time, Natalie also gave me permission to use the xxxxxxxx archives with appropriate permissions from those of you who posted mail to the list. Therefore, with your permission, I would like to include the e-mail you posted to the xxxxxxxx mailing list from January 1 to April 1, 1996 as part of a study to explore how people experience electronic support groups.

Before I describe the study in more detail, please allow me to introduce myself and tell you how I became interested in doing this study. I have been interested in support/self-help groups since 1990 at which time I assisted in starting a support group for people coping with terminal illness and their caregivers. As a result of my involvement with this group, I feel that support groups can provide invaluable social and emotional support by bringing together people who have shared similar experiences in coping with an illness or stressful life situation.

When I moved to Toronto in 1994, I became intrigued by the concept of electronic support groups when my academic advisor, Dr. Harvey Skinner (a xxxxxxxx subscriber), introduced me to the xxxxxxxx list. As a result, I have become very interested in learning more about on-line support groups, particularly your experiences as former or current subscribers to xxxxxxxx. From Harvey’s descriptions, and from my own brief observations, it seems that this list provides/d a very supportive environment for people trying to quit smoking. Being an ex-smoker myself, I truly understand how difficult it is to give up smoking for good!

GOAL OF STUDY: The purpose of this study is to explore how people experience on-line support groups. I feel that this study will contribute to a greater understanding of how the Internet is being used by individuals in their everyday lives to connect with others, improve their health, and to form new relationships around common interests. My interest in this topic is framed by a more general concern for how new communication technologies can be used for the benefit of individuals and society.
TO WHAT END WILL THE RESEARCH BE PUT?: The findings of this study will be used to complete my Master's thesis. In addition, major findings of the study will be written up and disseminated to appropriate journals for possible publication.

WHAT WILL THE STUDY INVOLVE? There will be two general phases to the study. In the first phase of the study, I would like to familiarize myself with the day to day operation of the xxoooooo x list. In order to do this, I would like to analyze the xxoooooo x archives during the 3-month time period of January 1 to April 1, 1996. I feel that this will allow me to get a sense of the salient issues of the list, and to discover themes relating to how the list was experienced (e.g. how was the list used? how did subscribers interact with one another?). To protect your anonymity, all identifying elements (e.g. e-mail address, name, mailing list address) will be removed from the message headers prior to analysis and will be replaced with an alias. Your e-mail address and alias will be recorded separately and will be accessible only to me. Also, if you do not wish to have particular e-mail postings included in the study, you can request that they be excluded from the analysis.

In the second phase of the study I would like to ask about 20 of you to take part in on-line interviews. At that time, you can agree or refuse to take part in the interview, and you can refuse the interview even if you have previously consented to my including your archived e-mail in phase one of the study. Interviews will be conducted using personal (one to one) e-mail and will focus on gaining greater insight about your experiences as a subscriber to the xxoooooo x list.

Please note that your participation in the study is *completely voluntary*. At any time, you may refuse to answer any questions and/or withdraw your participation in the study. Ethical issues are of the utmost importance. Information about your identity (e-mail address, mailing list address, name, etcetera) will be kept in the strictest confidence and any reports based on the study will always report quotes anonymously. The name and address of the mailing list will not be divulged in any reports of the study.

I value any feedback, questions, and/or concerns you have about the study. Also, if you feel that there are goals that I should include as part of the study that could benefit you as a group, please do not hesitate to let me know. I can be reached at the e-mail address or telephone number provided below. Alternatively, you can contact Dr. Harvey Skinner at harvey.skinner@utoronto.ca or at telephone number (416) 978-8989.

(Please note that Harvey will be on vacation until May 28, 1996).

I would appreciate it if you could indicate below whether you agree or do not agree to take part in the study. Please reply to this message (make sure the return address is j.polzer@utoronto.ca) and then complete section 1 if you agree to participate in the study, or complete section 2 if you do not want to participate.
Thanks very much for your time and consideration. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Jess:)

SECTION 1: If you agree to take part in the study, reply to this message (make sure the return address is j.polzer@utoronto.ca), complete sections A through D below, and then send this message back to me.

***A. Yes, I agree to take part in the study.

TO INDICATE THIS, PLEASE TYPE AN ‘X’ BETWEEN THESE BRACKETS: [ ].

***B. The consent form below outlines your rights as a participant in the study, and my obligations as the researcher.

PLEASE READ AND COMPLETE THE CONSENT FORM BY TYPING IN THE REQUESTED INFORMATION INSIDE THE SQUARE BRACKETS BELOW.

Consent Form

As a participant in this study, I understand that:

1. The purpose of this study is to explore how individuals experience computer-mediated support groups available on the Internet. The focus of the study may change and/or become more specific as the study proceeds.
2. My participation in the study is voluntary and I have the right to withdraw at any time. At any point during the study, I can contact the researcher to request that any information I have provided not be included in the study.
3. There will be two phases in the study. In the first phase, the e-mail I posted to the xxxxxxx list from January 1 to April 1 1996 will be recorded and included in the study. If, for any reason, I do not want some of my e-mail included in the study, I can inform the researcher that I want certain messages to be “off the record” so that she can exclude the e-mail from the study.
4. The second phase of the study will involve the researcher interviewing approximately 25 list subscribers through personal e-mail. I may be requested to give a personal interview, although I am not obligated to agree to an interview (even if I have taken part in the first phase of the study). If I do agree to take part in an interview, I will be asked questions or asked to comment on my experiences as a member of the xxxxxxx list. I understand that I can refuse to comment on any topics or refuse to answer any questions. Also, I can terminate the interview at any time during the interview.
5. My identity will be kept in complete confidence and will be known to only the researcher, Jessica Polzer. Any information I give during either phase of the
study will be used anonymously by removing any identifying elements from the
e-mail transcripts (e.g., name, e-mail address, mailing list name). Thus, I will not
be identifiable in any reports of this study. Any information I provide that
identifies me by its content (that is, after removing usual identifiers) will be used
in written reports "only with my permission".
6. Any questions, comments, or concerns I have regarding the study can be
directed to: Jessica Polzer at j.polzer@utoronto.ca, or telephone (416) 657-
1740, or to Dr. Harvey Skinner at harvey.skinner@utoronto.ca, or telephone
(416) 978-8989.

I have read my rights as a research participant. I understand these rights and I
agree to take part in this study.

NAME: [ ]
DATE: [ ]
ALIAS (OPTIONAL): [ ]
E-MAIL: [ ]

********************************************
Responsibilities of Researcher

As the primary researcher in the above-named study, I, Jessica Polzer, understand
that I have the following obligations and responsibilities as outlined by the Ethical
Electronic Research Guidelines (from Schrum (1995). Framing the debate: Ethical
research in the information age. Qualitative Inquiry, 1(3), 311-325).

1. Researchers should understand the basic tenets for conducting ethical
   qualitative research.
2. Researchers should consider the participants as owners of the materials that are
   created; the respondents should have the ability to modify or correct statements
   for spelling, substance, or language.
3. Researchers need to describe in detail the goals of the research, the purposes
   to which the results will be put, plans of the researcher to protect participants,
   and recourse open to those who feel mistreated.
4. Researchers should strive to create a climate of trust, collaboration, and equality
   with electronic community members, within an environment that is nonevaluative
   and safe.
5. Researchers should negotiate their entry into an electronic community,
   beginning with the owner of the discussion, if one exists. After gaining entry,
   they should make their presence known in any electronic community as
   frequently as necessary to inform all participants of their presence and
   engagement in electronic research.
6. Researchers should treat electronic mail as private correspondence that is not to
   be forwarded or shared with others unless express permission is given, except
   for the inclusion of anonymous quotes in the research.
7. Researchers have an obligation to begin by informing participants as much as possible about the purposes, activities, benefits, and burdens that may result from their being studied.

8. Researchers must inform participants as to any risks that might result from their agreeing to be part of the study - especially psychological or social risks.

9. Researchers must respect the identity of the members of the community, with special efforts to mask the origins of the communication, unless express permission to use identifying information is given.

10. Researchers must be aware of the steep learning curve for electronic communications. Information about the research should be placed in a variety of accessible formats.

11. Researchers have an obligation to the electronic community in which they work and participate to communicate back the results of their work.

I, Jessica Polzer, have read and understand my responsibilities as a researcher in the study “Self-help by electronic mail: An investigation of perceptions and meanings of computer-mediated support communities”. I agree to uphold these principles at all times during the study.

NAME: [Jessica Polzer (Jess:)]
DATE: [May 10/96]

***C. I prefer to receive the consent form through regular mail.
TO INDICATE THIS, PLEASE TYPE AN ‘X’ BETWEEN THESE SQUARE BRACKETS: [ ].

***D. Yes, I would like to receive a summary of the results of the study once it has been completed.
TO INDICATE THIS PLEASE TYPE AN ‘X’ BETWEEN THESE BRACKETS [ ].

I would like the results of the study sent to my e-mail address.
TO INDICATE THIS, PLEASE TYPE AN ‘X’ BETWEEN THESE BRACKETS [ ].

I would like the results of the study sent to my home address.
TO INDICATE THIS, PLEASE INDICATE YOUR HOME ADDRESS HERE:[ ).

Thank you for your participation in this study. Your contribution is greatly appreciated. Do not hesitate to contact myself, Jessica Polzer, or my academic advisor, Dr. Harvey Skinner, at the addresses provided on the consent form if you have any questions or concerns regarding the study.
SECTION 2: If you do not want to take part in the study, reply to this message (make sure the return address is j.polzer@utoronto.ca), and then complete the section below.

***No, I do not agree to take part in the study.
TO INDICATE THIS, PLEASE TYPE AN 'X' BETWEEN THESE BRACKETS: [ ].

By refusing to take part in the study, the e-mail I posted to the xxxxxxxxxxx list from January 1 to April 1, 1996 will *not* be used in the study and I will not be requested to take part in an on-line interview at a later date.
Hello again :) 

I am writing to request your participation in an on-line interview. You do not have to agree to this request, even though you agreed to participate in the first phase of my study of the xxxxxxxxxx list. However, I would very much appreciate your participation as I am interested in learning more about your experiences as a subscriber to the xxxxxxxxxx list.

If you agree to take part in the interview you will be asked to answer about 10 open-ended questions about your experiences as a member of the xxxxxxxxxx list. A series of questions and/or topics will be e-mailed to you and you will be asked to reflect on and respond to the questions, and/or to provide commentary on the suggested topics. In addition to the questions and/or topics that I send you, you will also have the opportunity to address any issues that you feel are important regarding your experiences of the xxxxxxxxxx list. Also, you will be able to comment on how you feel about the format of the interview process itself.

The entire interview process may involve more than one e-mail exchange between us. Primarily, this is because I may wish to clarify my ideas that have resulted from the information you have provided. Also, this flexibility in the format of the interview will allow you to easily add any information that you feel is important, and/or to alter any statements you made in a previous e-mail transmission.

Any information you provide in the interview, including e-mail addresses and other identifiers, will be strictly confidential and any quotes taken from the interview will be used anonymously in reports. You can decline to answer any questions sent to you, and you can stop the interview process at any time.

Please indicate below whether or not you agree to participate in an on-line interview. If you do not respond within three days (by Tuesday Oct 22nd), I will contact you again with a follow-up request letter to ensure that you received this request. If you agree to the interview, you can expect to receive the first set of questions/topics within a few days.

If you agree to participate in an on-line interview, please reply to this message (make sure the return address is
j.polzer@utoronto.ca) and complete part A below. If you do not agree to participate in an on-line interview, please reply to this message and complete part B below.

A. Yes, I agree to take part in an on-line interview. TO INDICATE THIS, PLEASE TYPE AN 'X' BETWEEN THESE BRACKETS: [ ]

B. No, I do not agree to take part in an on-line interview. TO INDICATE THIS, PLEASE TYPE AN 'X' BETWEEN THESE BRACKETS: [ ]

Please feel free to contact me any time if you have any questions or concerns. Also, you may direct any complaints or concerns to my thesis supervisor, Dr. Harvey Skinner, at e-mail address harvey.skinner@utoronto.ca, or by phone at (416) 978-8989.

Thank you very much for considering this request.

Sincerely,

Jess :)}
APPENDIX I: INTERVIEW GUIDE - SESSION ONE

Hello again and thank you for agreeing to take part in an on-line interview.

Section I includes 6 brief questions that focus on demographic information. This information will *not* be used to identify you. Rather, these questions have been included in order to obtain more of an understanding of your background. Sections II through VII include 13 open-ended questions that focus on your experiences of the xxxxxxxx list, as well as your perceptions of this interview questionnaire. Feel free to reflect at length on the questions and to write freely and as much as you like.

If possible, please respond by one week (Friday January 24). However, if you cannot meet this deadline, please let me know.

In terms of transmitting your responses to me, please do so in the way that is most convenient for you. You may wish to simply 'reply' to this e-mail and insert your responses at the appropriate places. In doing this, you may wish to type your responses in CAPS so they appear distinct from the questions. Alternatively, you may wish to type your responses in a text editor and either copy them into your e-mail message or send them as an attachment. If you choose the latter method, please number your responses to correspond with the questions. Also, if you send your responses as an attachment, please save and transmit as plain text (ASCII).

(Note: Please note that I have typed the preambles and instructions preceding the questions in CAPS so that you can easily distinguish them from the questions.)

Again, thank you for your participation in this interview. Your time and effort will certainly help make this study a successful one!

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SECTION 1: PLEASE PROVIDE SOME GENERAL INFORMATION ABOUT YOURSELF

a) What is your age?

b) Are you male or female?

c) What is your occupation?
d) From where and when did you tend to post to the xxxxxxxx list (e.g. from work, from home, morning, evening, etc.)?

e) How did you find out about the xxxxxxxx mailing list?

f) Have you ever attended a face-to-face support or self-help group (for smoking or otherwise)? If so, which one/s did you attend?

SECTION 2: I'D LIKE TO LEARN MORE ABOUT HOW YOU BECAME INVOLVED IN THE XXXXXXXX LIST.

1. What influenced your decision to subscribe to the mailing list?

2. What were your expectations as a subscriber to the xxxxxxxx list?

3. Describe your involvement with the xxxxxxxx list. In what ways, if any, did your involvement with the list change over time (either in quality or quantity)?

4. How long did you subscribe to the list? If you unsubscribed to the list, what were the reasons that you unsubscribed?

SECTION 3: I WOULD LIKE TO LEARN MORE ABOUT YOUR EXPERIENCES AS A SUBSCRIBER TO THE XXXXXXXX LIST. PLEASE PROVIDE ANY INFORMATION THAT YOU FEEL IS RELEVANT TO THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS.

5. In what ways, if at all, did subscribing to the xxxxxxxx list help you try to quit smoking, quit smoking, and/or maintain a xxxxxxxx status?

6. What were the benefits of being on this mailing list? How (in what ways) were these aspects benefits?

7. What were the drawbacks of being on this mailing list? How (in what ways) were these aspects drawbacks?

8. How did being on the xxxxxxxx list make you feel?

9. Suppose you met someone who knew *nothing* about the Internet or e-mail and they asked you to describe what it was like to be on the xxxxxxxx list. What would you say?
SECTION 4: I'D LIKE TO LEARN ABOUT HOW YOUR EXPERIENCES WITH THE XXXXXXXX LIST COMPARED TO YOUR EXPERIENCES WITH FACE-TO-FACE GROUPS.

PLEASE NOTE:

FOR THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS, IF YOU HAVE *NOT* BELONGED TO A FACE-TO-FACE *SUPPORT* GROUP, PLEASE USE ANOTHER FACE-TO-FACE GROUP YOU ARE INVOLVED IN AS THE BASIS FOR COMPARISON.

IF YOU CANNOT THINK OF *ANY* FACE-TO-FACE GROUP THAT YOU HAVE BEEN INVOLVED WITH, PLEASE WRITE ANY THOUGHTS YOU HAVE ABOUT HOW THE XXXXXXXX LIST MIGHT BE SIMILAR TO, OR DIFFERENT FROM, FACE-TO-FACE GROUPS IN GENERAL.

10. What are the similarities and differences between your experiences of the xxxxxxxx list and your experiences of any face-to-face groups that you are involved in (either currently or in the past)?

In noting the similarities and differences, please address any of the sub-topics listed below that you feel are relevant. Also, you may choose to address other issues that are not included in the list.

That is, how were your experiences of the xxxxxxxx list and your experiences of face-to-face groups similar and/or different in terms of:

a) giving help or support?

b) receiving help or support?

c) the type of help or support available?

d) the level of help or support available?

e) disclosing personal information about yourself?

f) the way/s in which you participated in the group (e.g. lurking, posting)?

g) group cohesion/sense of belonging?

h) group structure (for example, leadership, roles of new members and long-standing members)?

i) your relationships with others?

j) realizing your goals re: smoking?

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SECTION 5: I'D LIKE TO LEARN ABOUT HOW YOUR EXPERIENCES WITH THE XXXXXXXX LIST COMPARED TO YOUR EXPERIENCES WITH OTHER COMPUTER-BASED GROUPS.

11. i) Apart from your involvement with the xxxxxxxx list, have you subscribed to another mailing list, or participated in another computer-based group (e.g. 171
newsgroup), either currently or in the past? If so, which computer-based groups have you been involved in?

ii) How did your experiences of the xxxxxxx list compare to your experiences of the other computer-based group/s you have been involved in? Please note any similarities and/or differences that come to mind.

SECTION 6: OTHER ISSUES

12. Please indicate any other issues, thoughts, or feelings that you feel are important to discuss with regard to your experiences of the xxxxxxx list.

SECTION 7: QUESTIONNAIRE EVALUATION

13. Overall, how did you find answering this questionnaire (too long, too short, too vague, too specific, or otherwise)? Please feel free to elaborate in any way you feel is appropriate.

THANK YOU VERY MUCH! : )
>> You said:
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>> 1. What influenced your decision to subscribe to the
>> mailing list?
>
>> It was a very non-threatening way to get support around
>> quitting smoking. I could also do it from my house (I was
>> housebound initially as I mentioned above). There was some
>> element of novelty in it too, I guess because the net was new
>> and exciting.
>
>> Question #2:
>
>> What exactly do you mean when you say "non-threatening"?
>> That is, in what ways was the list a non-threatening way to
>> get support?
>
> Because I didn't have to participate in any way; I could just
> lurk if I wanted to. And, the distance and relative anonymity
> of it felt somewhat protective also. Not having people be
> aware of my physical appearance was somehow freeing to a
> certain degree. Less self-consciousness, I guess. I felt like
> I could be myself more, in a way.
REFERENCES


Harris, D. (1987). A support group - by computer? The Newsletter of the Phobia Society of America, VI.


Smith, M. Voices from the WELL: The Logic of the Virtual Commons. *Published electronically at www.sscnet.ucla.edu/soc/csoc/virtcomm.htm#Social, 43*.


