International Forum
Vol. 20, No. 1
June 2017
pp. 5-17

FEATURE

The Shifting Future of Qualitative Research

John Wesley Taylor V

Abstract. *Data must be interpreted. As we connect the dots within qualitative research and in society at large, certain identifiable trends begin to emerge, tangible developments that point to a shifting future within qualitative inquiry. This article considers a number of trends that will affect the future of qualitative research. These include the development of qualitative infrastructures, the increased use of mixed methods, movement from insight to empathy, the proliferation of digital affordances, the rise of video, the arrival of big data, and a renewed focus on answering the "why." The article also explores implications, problems, and opportunities posed by these shifts and suggests how qualitative researchers might perhaps best respond.*

Introduction

As we look toward the horizon and begin to connect the dots within qualitative research and in society at large, it becomes evident that matters will not simply proceed as they are, with qualitative researchers continuing to operate within the comfort zones that they have carved out. Important developments are taking place. Movements are taking shape that represents a future shift for qualitative inquiry and for those who engage in qualitative research.

In this article, we will examine seven emerging trends that will affect the future of qualitative research. We will also explore a number of implications, challenges, and opportunities posed by these shifts and suggest how qualitative researchers might perhaps best respond. The bottom line is that if we ignore these trends, we do so to our own peril.

The Development of Qualitative Infrastructures

Research politicians and funding entities have been exerting pressure to build up quantitative data infrastructures, in order to provide for the archival of research data and to make this data accessible for other researchers and studies

(Flick, 2015). With increasing frequency, this has become a condition in order for proposed studies to receive grant funding.

Qualitative inquiry will not be exempt from this trend. The emerging expectation is that qualitative data should no longer be produced exclusively for a specific research project (Davidson, Paulus, & Jackson, 2016). The new standard will be the retention and accessibility of qualitative data for secondary analysis.

The rationale behind this development is fourfold. First, the development of qualitative data infrastructures will serve to extend the societal relevance of qualitative inquiry. Second, it will extend local qualitative inquiry toward an international and even global coverage. Third, it can provide the basis for meta-synthesis and the development of meta-theory (Higgins & Green, 2011). Finally, qualitative research infrastructures can strengthen credibility. The Research Council of Germany, for example, noted, "As a replication of studies in the realm of qualitative research… normally is not possible, the inter-subjective transparency of scientific statements on the basis of the existing primary data is a major quality criterion of qualitative research. Losing such data is particularly sensitive against this background" (Research Council of Germany, 2011, pp. 56-57). Together, these arguments form a persuasive rationale for the development and utilization of qualitative data infrastructures.

There are at least two potential difficulties, however, that will need to be addressed. The first problem is the risk of decontextualization. Context plays a key role in qualitative inquiry. In archiving data for secondary analysis, however, we encounter a very danger of losing the context of data and findings. Uwe Flick (2011), for example, observes, "Can we use and re-use qualitative data in a meaningful way without really knowing the context of data collection and the methodological particulars, and without taking them into account?" (p. 603). A potential solution might be to include a detailed description of context in qualitative data archival systems. These contextual components can then serve as meta-data, allowing different archived datasets to be linked.

A second problem is ethical in nature. If we start interviews by asking participants for their informed consent, for example, will such permissions still be valid for the re-use of data for other purposes and by other researchers? Furthermore, what will secondary analysis imply for approvals by Institutional Research Boards and Human Subjects committees? While multiple ethical implications will need to be sorted out, a potential solution may be to simply include re-analysis permission as part of the participant consent form.

An Increased Use of Mixed Methods

Early on, quantitative and qualitative research were seen as dueling paradigms and colliding realms. After a time, however, quantitative and qualitative inquiry came to be viewed more as complementary domains. Qualitative research,

for example, was held to be more adept at theory generation while quantitative research was more effective in the domain of theory verification.

Then the concept of linked phases emerged. In a given research topic, for instance, qualitative methodologies could best serve to explore a new area in which little prior research had been conducted. Quantitative methodologies could then deepen understanding of that area, with a qualitative approach re-entering the picture in order to enrich the quantitative findings. Similarly, in the development of instrumentation, a qualitative approach was perhaps most useful in developing a set of items while quantitative research could then take those items and develop scales, which could then be most effectively described through qualitative refinement.

Most recently, an integrated approach has taken the stage, wherein a given study incorporates both quantitative and qualitative elements, although some research may be more strongly quantitative or qualitative, depending on the needs and the focus of the study itself (Creswell, 2016).

All told, this shift has resulted in an emerging trend towards the increased use of mixed methods. Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) note that the foundational premise of mixed methods is that "the use of quantitative and qualitative approaches, in combination, provides a better understanding of research problems than either approach alone" (p. 5). Important developments have consequently taken place in the arena of mixed methods.

While the 1980s and 1990s were the decades of the paradigm wars between quantitative and qualitative approaches, 1998 brought the publication of *Mixed Methodology: Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* by Tashakkori and Teddlie, as well as their *Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social and Behavioral Research* in 2003. The first issue of the *Journal of Mixed Methods Research* was published in 2007. *Best Practices for Mixed Methods Research in the Health Sciences* by Creswell, Klassen, Plano Clark, and Smith was published in 2011 and adopted as guidelines by the National Institutes of Health (NIH). More recently, in 2013, the Mixed Methods International Research Association (MMIRA) was founded.

The rationale behind this trend is the belief that mixed methods can develop a holistic, multi-dimensional, and robust analysis of social phenomena more effectively than a single method alone (Mertens et al., 2016). Several design formats have emerged. These include (a) convergent parallel, a simultaneous qualitative/quantitative approach, which contributes toward methodological triangulation; (b) explanatory sequential, in which quantitative is followed by qualitative in the understanding that qualitative methods will help explain the quantitative findings; and (c) exploratory sequential, in which qualitative is followed by quantitative, in order to test or generalize the qualitative findings (Snelson, 2016).

At least two problems, however, face the trend toward mixed methods. The first is the potential displacement of qualitative triangulation. The danger is that researchers will see the quantitative-qualitative approach of mixed methods as a sufficient crosscheck that vacates the need for triangulation within the qualitative dimension itself. The second problem is the risk of paradigm disarticulation, namely, that mixed methods researchers will view the qualitative approach simply as a technique, stripped of its naturalistic philosophical foundation.

An implication of these matters is that solid training in mixed methods needs to be provided in undergraduate and graduate research courses, as well as in professional development (Gough & Lyons, 2016). In this training, we need to challenge the quantitative/qualitative dichotomy by clarifying strategies for integration.

From Insight to Empathy

The world is confronted with wicked problems and grand challenges (Mertens et al., 2016). Wicked problems are defined by multiple interacting systems, societal implications, and the lack of clarity regarding causes and solutions, all complicated by the fact that time is running out. Examples of wicked problems include power inequalities, barriers to social justice, bigotry and exploitation, and human rights violations. Grand challenges include environmental degradation, social and economic inequality, and geopolitical instability. These challenges are illustrated by climate change, widespread poverty, refugee crises, and disparity in access to education and healthcare.

There are two different perspectives on the researcher's role. One view sees the qualitative researcher as a producer and disseminator of new knowledge. The ultimate criterion of success is to be published in high-impact, peer-reviewed journals. The second perspective is that of the researcher as a supporter and perhaps catalyst of social transformation. The criterion of success is whether or not the research has contributed to positive social change. This, of course, is not a clear-cut distinction, but more a matter of emphasis. Most qualitative researchers, for example, would state that they hope that their efforts result in both new knowledge and social transformation. The emphasis, however, has been largely on the generation of new knowledge. In the future, the emphasis will shift toward the goal of social transformation.

To look at it another way, qualitative research has typically focused on the rigor of the research design, as well as of findings and conclusions. In the future, the emphasis will shift toward practical relevance and the nature of the contribution in addressing wicked problems and grand challenges.

The underlying premise in this shift from insight to empathy is simply that social justice is the responsibility of all, including the qualitative researcher. Consequently, good qualitative research should incorporate a transformative

paradigm focused on human rights and social justice. In this scenario, the responsibilities of the qualitative researcher are to clarify human rights, engage in cultural responsiveness, recognize the assets of all stakeholders, address discrimination and oppression, and promote social justice.

Qualitative market research is a case in point. Here we encounter a trend emerging toward engagement and empathy. Increasingly, clients do not want to understand their customers merely on a cognitive level, but desire, rather, to connect with them on an emotional level. As qualitative market researchers begin to focus on consumers as human beings, viewing the study as more a conversation than a product test, more meaningful dialogue begins to take place, yielding deeper insights and more authentic connections between brands and people.

The trend from insight to empathy yields a number of methodological implications (Mertens, 2015). Qualitative researchers should employ culturally responsive methods, engaging with the full range of stakeholders and ensuring the safety of participants. Local advisory committees should be established, and there should be an intention purpose to empower the marginalized. Beyond methodology, researchers should adopt a socially responsible role and engage in creative thinking about ways that they may be part of the solutions. This involves a commitment to seek opinions from the various stakeholders regarding the causes of wicked problems and grand challenges, as well as consequences and potential solutions, especially from those most directly affected.

Proliferation of Digital Affordances

Across the digital landscape, social media and mobile technology will continue to change the ways in which qualitative researchers engage in recruitment and data gathering. Usage of social media has been growing across age groups (see Figure 1, Pew Research Center, 2016).

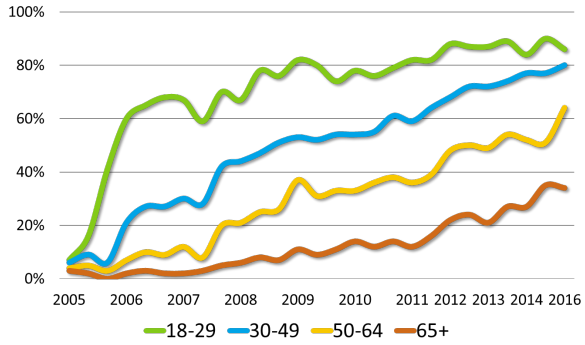

Figure 1. Percentage of United States adults who use at least one social media site, by age.

Facebook, Inc. dominates the social media landscape, with its products Facebook, Whatsapp, Messenger, and Instagram (Richter, 2016). Tencent, Inc. follows, with WeChat and QZone. Even platforms, however, such as Twitter, Snapchat, and Weibo, boast hundreds of millions of users. The size, in fact, of these social media platforms is impressive. If Facebook were a country, it would be the world's largest country. And if WhatsApp or Instagram were a country, they would follow only China and India. Even Twitter and Google Plus have similar numbers of users as the entire population of the United States (Schneider, 2017; Statistica, 2017; World Economic Forum, n.d.; World Economic Forum, 2017; Worldometers, 2017).

The scale of social media presents opportunities for qualitative research. Never before has it been possible to reach essentially any demographic, thanks to the worldwide scale of the web. Furthermore, with the advent of social media, people are now more willing to share their lives with others. An increasing openness of online respondents is clearly evident, with a willingness to invest significant amounts of time and effort as participants of online research studies (Watkins, 2016).

We now turn to the research affordances provided by mobile technologies. Mobile technology is ubiquitous. It is estimated by 2020 that there will be 6.1 billion smartphone users, overtaking those with fixed-line phone subscriptions (Ericsson, 2015). Mobile technology is also disruptive, particularly those technologies that only exist in app format. Uber and Lyft, for example, have dramatically changed the way in which people order transport. Snapchat has introduced an ephemeral form of mobile communication, and WhatsApp has made SMS redundant.

The impact is being felt in the ways that we approach research. Qualitative market research, for example, has begun to implement mobile ethnography tools to engage with participants at the moment they are interacting with brands or making purchasing decisions. Similarly, qualitative interviewers will also carry out real-time, real-place conversations with participants, similar to but more effective than the webcam interviews used previously.

All of this brings us to a number of considerations. The first of these has to do with target audience. What target group do we want to access in a given study? This can vary, depending on factors such as location, age, gender, ethnicity, language, interest, or need, among others. Social media, however, tend to skew across demographics. Twitter skews age 25-40 and male. Instagram skews under age 25. Snapchat skews very young, with teens as its largest age group. Pinterest skews strongly female and event planners. Even Facebook, that spans all generations, skews somewhat female and older (Schneider, 2017). In terms of geographic reach, Facebook clearly dominates the globe although there are exceptions, such as China and Russia, as well as some countries in the Middle East. If we look at those social networks in second place, however, there is much greater

diversity. Twitter predominates in the United States, Western Europe, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan. Instagram is dominant in Latin America, Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia, and parts of Africa. LinkedIn is strong in India, and Reddit comes to the forefront in Canada and Oceania (World Economic Forum, 2017).

Another important consideration for qualitative researchers involves the use of hashtags, which are used to create or join a conversation, to interact, and to promote a message to interested audiences (Schneider, 2017). Hashtags also provide a way for individuals to search for posts on social media that have a common topic. In order to leverage the power of hashtags, qualitative researchers will need to create unique hashtags that brand the study, and that allows users to access a curated stock of content that tells about the research project and that allows the target audience to engage with the researcher, contribute to the conversation, and become part of the story.

A final consideration is that of respondent multitasking. As qualitative researchers, we need to be aware that respondents will often be engaged in other activities while responding to research prompts via social media or mobile technology. A study of individuals completing a survey on a mobile device found that a full 60% of respondents where engaged in another activity while responding (Kelley, 2016). These activities included watching TV, reading or studying, eating or drinking, playing an online game or app, or surfing the internet on another device or even on the same device. We should be aware that while individuals using digital affordances are often quite willing to share with us, we do not have their undivided attention!

The Rise of Video

Even compared to smartphone and social media usage, video is experiencing a meteoric rise (see Figure 2, Kelley, 2016). In fact, it is estimate that video will account for 70% of the increase in data transfers over the next 3 years.

So why use video in qualitative research? There are a number of reasons: (a) Video provides layered data, including background analytics, facial emotions, voice tonality, and other biometrics such as eye tracking, in addition to the words themselves. (b) Video increases participant engagement, with respondents providing greater and richer information. Responding to a prompt regarding personal exercise routine, the typical text respondent provided 10.1 words, yielding 2.0 codes; whereas the typical video respondent provided 61.4 words, yielding 4.2 codes (Kelly, 2016). (c) Video can provide in-the-moment, on-the-spot data, yielding fresh data and greater efficiency than traditional face-to-face interviews.

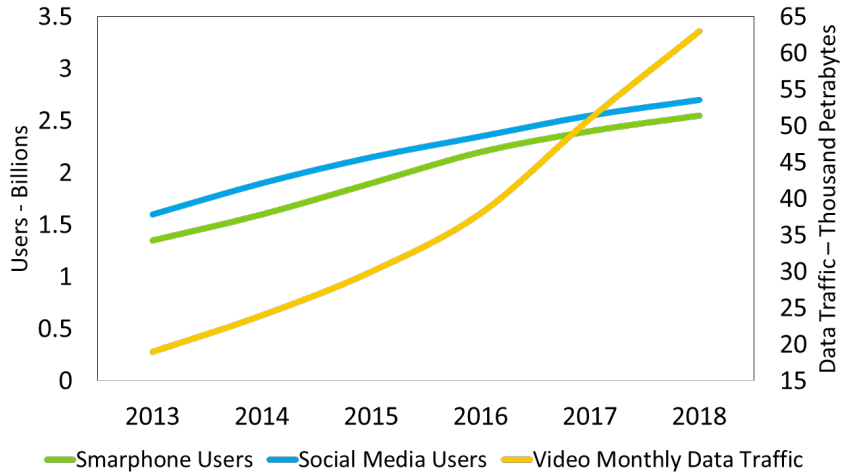

Figure 2. Global smartphone, social media, and video usage.

There are, of course, certain matters that need to be considered when utilizing video in qualitative research. One of these considerations relates to video response rate and quality. A recent study found that only 40% of potential respondents gave consent for video while from only 36% of these was video actually received. Of those videos received, only 73% was of acceptable quality to be utilized in the study. The remainder suffered from problems of bad lighting, no sound, or too much background noise, rendering them unusable. Furthermore, there seem to be significant geographical differences in the proportion of potential respondents willing to provide video. This ranges from approximately 20% in Singapore and the USA, to over 30% in Brazil and over 60% in China (LightSpeed, 2015).

Then there are other matters which will need to be taken into account. These matters arising include the response skew of video populations; privacy protection and data security when using video; video data management and storage; the need for analytics software to assist in video transcription, chunking, coding, and filtering; processes of video editing and collage creation; and the need for qualitative research report formats that incorporate rich media, including video.

There is at least one more matter to be considered, and that is turning video around so that it serves as a tool of qualitative research, particularly to promote and invite participation in qualitative studies. To this end, video can be a potentially powerful and effective tool. Four times as many people would rather watch a video about something than read about it; social video generates 12 times more shares than text and images combined; and businesses using video grow revenue 49% faster year-to-year than organizations without video (Schneider, 2017).

Now, here is the bad news. You only have about 8 seconds to hook them, and less than a minute to tell the story and reel them in (McSpadden, 2015). So what can you do? Place "hooks" within the first few seconds of your promotional video to be shared on social media. Offer a solution to a problem. Go right to the point and then tell the story. Brand your video using logo and/or hashtags. Include a call-to-action. It will also be important to incorporate text, perhaps through closed captioning, in order to attract attention without sound—particularly vital when the video appears in newsfeeds.

Big Data Arrives

The incorporation of social media, mobile technology, and video in qualitative research will result in the arrival of big data. Video will be, in fact, a major driving force. It is estimated that the proportion of video in consumer internet traffic, for example, will rise from 57% in 2016 to 79% in 2018 (Kelley, 2016).

Social media data mining, however, can also create vast amounts of information. Researchers in a study that examined breast cancer treatment barriers by analyzing social media discussions during one year developed software that searched postings on social networks, message boards, patient communities, and topical sites. These posts were then categorized based on thematic patterns. Overall, the research identified 1,024,041 unique posts related to breast cancer treatment, of which 57% discussed treatment barriers (Freedman, Viswanath, Vazluis, & Keating, 2016). Even a relatively small number of engaged participants can generate an enormous amount of expression very quickly. In one study, for example, 70 participants produced 400 pages of text, over 1,100 images, and many hours of video in just 5 days of activities (August, 2014).

How will qualitative researchers deal with this data deluge? Obviously qualitative researchers will need better digital tools for content analysis. Qualitative data analysis software (QDAS) will need to provide new approaches to data mining and task automation. Qualitative researchers will also need to take a team approach. The days of the "lone ranger" qualitative researcher are probably numbered. To manage the avalanche of data, qualitative researchers will need to organize themselves into teams of coders and analytics specialists, assisting lead researchers in identifying patterns and themes, and drawing conclusions from the data.

There will also be an increasingly urgent need for data visualization. Large qualitative data sets will, in fact, require creative transformation into visual representations that catch the popular imagination. One way this will be done is through the integration of QDAS with Geographical Information Systems, thus bringing together the social and the spatial.

The arrival of big data will, of course, usher in other challenges. These will include retaining closeness to the underpinning data; resisting the pressure to focus

on volume and breadth rather than on depth and meaning; the risk that the automated text analytics of social media data will result in simply a quantitative analysis of sentiment or a ranking of topic headings; and the danger that social media tools, while facilitating recruitment, will also indiscriminately open the floodgates to everyone.

Answering the "Why"

Understanding why something is happening is key to knowing what to do about it. This understanding provides insight on how to move forward. One of the most urgent and persistent goals in research, therefore, is the need to address the why. Quantitative research can successfully tell us the what, when, where, and how. It has difficulty, however, explaining the why. Qualitative inquiry, however, can and should be able to explain the why. Consequently, in addition to its traditional role of generating deep insight, qualitative research will increasingly focus on its unique role of delivering the "why" behind the patterns in data.

Conclusion

In this article, we have examined seven developing trends that will bring about a future shift in qualitative research. These, of course, are not the only changes taking shape on the horizon. Other emerging trends include the following:

- Citizen research will proliferate.
- Clients will expect immersion, especially in qualitative market research.
- Recruiting will get better, resulting in more refined samples.
- Data management tools will become more powerful and user-friendly.
- A transformation from researcher to [researcher + interpretive guide] will take place.
- New research talent will be increasingly tech savvy.
- Less time will be spent on direct questioning and more time on task-based activities (à la Jean Piaget)

Here, then, is a final prophecy for the future of qualitative research:

1. The future of qualitative research will be q*uite different* from what qualitative research is today.
2. We can have a *fair degree of confidence* regarding a number of developing trends.
3. Nevertheless, *there will be surprises*!
   What is urgently needed is forward thinking, adaptability, and innovation. So rise up, and invade the future!

References

August, S. (2014). *Big data and the future of qualitative research*. Retrieved from rwconnect.esomar.org/big-data-and-the-future-of-qualitative-research/

Creswell, J. W. (2016). Reflections on the MMIRA "The Future of Mixed Methods" Task Force Report. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, *10*(3), 215–219. doi:10.1177/1558689816650298

Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2011). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Davidson, J., Paulus, T., & Jackson, K. (2016). Speculating on the future of digital tools for qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *22*(7), 606-610. doi:10.1177/1077800415622505

Ericsson. (2015). *Ericsson mobility report: On the pulse of the networked society*. Retrieved from www.ericsson.com/res/docs/2015/ericsson-mobility-report-june-2015.pdf

Flick, U. (2015). Qualitative inquiry: Developments, trends, and challenges for the politics of research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *21*(7), 599-608. doi:10.1177/1077800415583296

Freedman, R. A.; Viswanath, K.; Vaz-luis, I.; & Keating, N. L. (2016). Learning from social media: Utilizing advanced data extraction techniques to understand barriers to breast cancer treatment. *Breast Cancer Research and Treatment*, 158(2), 395-405. doi:10.1007/s10549-016-3872-2

Gough, B., & Lyons, A. (2016). The future of qualitative research in psychology: Accentuating the positive. *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science*, *50*(2), 234-243.

Higgins, J., & Green, S. (Eds.).(2011). *Cochrane handbook for systematic reviews of interventions*. West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell. Retrieved from https://dhosth.files.wordpress.com/2011/12/cochrane-handbook-for-systematic-reviews-of-interventions.pdf

Kelley, F. (2017). *Is video the future of qualitative research?* Retrieved from https://www.slideshare.net/LightspeedGMI/is-video-the-future-of-qualitative-research

LightSpeed Research. (2015). Retrieved from www.lightspeedresearch.com

McSpadden, K. (2015). *Now you have a shorter attention span than a goldfish*. Retrieved from http://time.com/3858309/attention-spans-goldfish/

Mertens, D. M. (2015). *Research in education and psychology: Integrating diversity with quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Mertens, D. M., Bazeley, P., Bowleg, L., Fielding, N., Maxwell, J., Molina-Azorin, J. F., & Niglas, K. (2016). *The future of mixed methods: A five-year projection to 2020*. Retrieved from https://mmira.wildapricot.org/resources/Documents/MMIRA%20task%20force%20report%20Jan2016%20final.pdf

Pew Research Center. (2016). *Social media fact sheet*. Retrieved from http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheet/social-media/

Research Council of Germany. (2011). *Recommendations on research infrastructures in the humanities and social sciences*. Retrieved from www.wissenschaftsrat.de/download/archiv/10465-11.pdf

Richter, F. (2016). *Facebook, Inc. dominates the social media landscape*. Retrieved from www.statista.com/chart/5194/active-users-of-social-networks-and-messaging-services/

Schneider, J. J. (2017). "Leveraging Social Media." Seminar hosted by the Department of Social Media and Big Data, North American Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.

Snelson, C. L. (2016). Qualitative and mixed methods social media research: A review of the literature. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *15*(1). doi:.1177/1609406915624574

Statistica. (2017). *Most famous social network sites worldwide*. Retrieved from https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/

Watkins, B. (2016). *Qualitative research: Adapting with the needs of researchers?* Retrieved from https://www.quirks.com/articles/qualitative-research-adapting-with-the-needs-of-researchers

World Economic Forum (n.d.). *How big are social networks*. Retrieved from assets.weforum.org/editor/5LyFo-miAzCMCawPuY90-aPIcFJssaeNiXHwNd9UVj4.png

World Economic Forum. (2017). *The world's most popular social networks, mapped*. Retrieved from www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/03/most-popular-social-networks-mapped/

Worldometers. (2017). Retrieved from http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/population-by-country/

John Wesley Taylor V, PhD, EdD
Associate Director of Education
General Conference, Silver Spring, Maryland, USA