'Cybermums' give birth to new project at University of Leicester

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A trail-blazing research project started by academics at the University of Leicester has paved the way for a new generation of academics. 'Cyberparents'- a project by University of Leicester academics Clare Madge and Henrietta O'Connor -started in 1998 in order to examine how new parents used the web for information and as a form of social support.

Such has been the success of this project that the researchers secured funding from the Economic and Social Research Council to create an online resource that explains how others could follow in their cybersteps. It has been launched at the Royal Statistical Society in London and is available at www.geog.le.ac.uk/orm.

Henrietta O'Connor, lecturer at the University of Leicester, said: "In 1998 I began working with Clare Madge on a research project which aimed to examine how, why and in what ways new parents were using parenting websites. While neither of us were technical experts we adapted and transferred traditional research methods to the internet; starting with an online questionnaire aimed at new parents.

"The response that we received to the questionnaire was surprising. Lots of new parents responded quickly and some agreed to a follow up interview, but they were dispersed all over the world. We decided to abandon our original plan of conducting interviews face to face and explored ways in which we could interview their respondents online."

Hence Cyberparents was born.

Henrietta added: "The project showed how the internet could be used to carry out social science research and generated a number of publications, but it also generated a lot of requests for Clare and myself to talk about online research. This interest led to us securing funding from the Economic and Social Research Council to create an online resource that explained how other researchers could follow in our footsteps."

The new resource, at www.geog.le.ac.uk/orm, provides a complete online training package for researchers in both the academic and commercial world to learn how to do online research.

The resource offers a wide range of hints and tips as well as discussing deeper ethical and theoretical questions. In particular it focuses on the process of undertaking online surveys, interviews and focus groups. The site offers a comprehensive technical guide designed to allow even the complete technophobe to use online research methods.

The resource is designed for researchers working in a range of fields. It has been trialled with academic researchers, postgraduate researchers, market researchers, doctors and community workers.

Source: University of Leicester