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5 The Potential of Electronic Communication and Information Technologies as Research Tools: Promise and Perils for the Future of Communication Research

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Scholars across several disciplines praise the methodological advantages afforded to research endeavors by the use of electronic communication and information technologies. At the same time, however, scholars note several disadvantages stemming from the use of these tools. To assess the utility of electronic communication and information technologies as research tools, we synthesize work on the methodological issues surrounding the use of these technologies for the future of communication research. Our overarching goal is to review prior and current perspectives in order to appropriately assess and critique the use of electronic tools in research pursuits while informing future applications of these tools in the field. Throughout the chapter we articulate the argument that sound theoretical and methodological practices determine the appropriateness of the application of any particular tool. Accordingly, our focus is on the specific methodological concerns that arise with the use of electronic technologies in the conduct of research. We organize our discussion into six major sections: sampling issues; data integrity concerns, including the reliability and validity of research design and measures; the potential afforded by electronic communication and information technologies; contemporary ethical considerations; an explicit assessment of the future of communication research in view of the application of electronic technologies; and a concluding section that establishes the contribution of our review and briefly outlines outstanding issues.

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