

Cherry Baylosis

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Mad Practices and Mobilities

Bringing Voices to Digital Ethnography

Cherry Baylosis

Abstract

There is a claim that digital media technologies can give voice to the voiceless (Alper 2017). As Couldry (2008) points out it is now commonplace for people – who have never done so before – to tell, share and exchange stories within, and through digital media. Additionally, the affordances of mobile media technologies allow people to speak, virtually anytime and anywhere, while the new internet based media sees that these processes converge to allow stories, information, ideas and discourses to circulate through communicative spaces, and into the daily lives of people (Sheller/Urry 2006). The purpose of this paper is to discuss a methodological framework that can be used to examine the extent that digital media practices can enable voice. My focus is on people ascribed the status of mental illness – people who have had an enduring history of silencing and oppression (Parr 2008). I propose theories of mobilities, and practice, to critically examine voice in practices related to digital media. In doing this, I advocate for digital ethnographic methods to engage these concepts, and to examine the potential of voice in digital mobile media. Specifically, I outline ethnographic methods involving the use of video (re)enactments of digital practices, and the use of reflective interviews to examine every day routines and movements in and around digital media (Pink 2012). I propose that observing and reflecting on such activities can generate insights into the significance these activities have in giving voice to those who are normally unheard.

Introduction

The new digitised media may offer some possibility for people labelled with mental illness to speak out about their experiences. With numerous interactive online spaces dedicated to talking about mental illness (e.g. Baylosis 2015; Boero/Pascoe 2012) people who have not done so before are able to exchange personal stories through digital forms (Couldry 2008). This may offer a correction to what Fraser (2000) calls 'hidden injustices', providing the means to distribute more widely the capacity to tell stories that challenge dominant representations of mental illness.

As digital media technologies increasingly become interwoven in daily life, so too does our need to develop methodological frameworks that can explore the potential of voice apparently afforded by digital media. By voice, I mean what Couldry (2010) refers to as the capacity to tell one's own story – to self-represent. This does not involve a sonic aspect of voice, but a *process* of meaning making and self-interpretation of experience. Such a capacity is heightened with the ubiquity of digital mobile media, where daily routines revolve in, and around digital media, providing ample possibilities to connect, and circulate stories.

I propose a novel methodological framework to examine the potential of voice in digital media for people living with mental illness. I do this by drawing attention to an emerging field of research where literature on digital practices, mobility and mad studies intersect. Situated at the junction, is a common thread of voice. Specifically, I argue that an examination of this nexus, using digital ethnographic methods, can open up possibilities to explore how, and if, everyday use of digital mobile media technologies can contribute to social change through processes of voice. Though my focus is on mental illness, I suggest that this may be applicable to other fields of research concerning marginalised others who lack voice. To begin, it is first necessary to discuss voice as an analytical focus across these three fields of literature.

Finding mad voices

Mad studies stems from a history of activism that has brought forward the voices of marginalised others in political and social spheres. In particular, mad activists and scholars, decry human rights violations that many people have, and continue to experience under the control of psychiatric care (Lewis 2013). For mad studies, psychiatry is imbued with power relations where those that are labelled as 'mentally ill' are required to *listen* to 'experts' who speak about *their* experiences (Coles 2013). This sets the context for paternalistic relations between health professionals and patients, where the 'mentally ill' are treated as passive recipients of medical attention. This feeds into a history of coercion and harmful treatments, where the voices of the mad have been restricted, or even silenced, in decision-making about how to live their lives. Here, 'expert' voices, are privileged in defining madness and developing treatments (Russo and Beresford 2014)

Thus, for mad studies, voice is crucial to developing counter-narratives that can subvert psychiatric discourses that are privileged in representing realities and 'truths' regarding 'mental illness'. Like Couldry (2008; 2010), mad studies' use of the term voice, refers to the capacity to self-represent, and to self-define (Chamberlin 2005). Here, mad studies problematizes the concept of 'mental illness'. Not only is it predicated on oppressive power relations that exclude the mentally ill from defining their experience, but it also represents a sociopolitical construct that legitimises individualistic medical intervention that largely negates cultural

and social factors that contribute to mental health (Cross 2010). Mad studies then, as a way of rebalancing power, bring mad voices to the academic table where experiential knowledge is legitimised in developing a critical discourse on psychiatry (McWade et al. 2015). It strategically reclaims, contests, and negotiates labels and treatments that are imposed on the mad by the psych-sciences (Crossley/Crossley 2001). Hence, the use of the terms ‘mad’, and ‘madness’ signifies the reappropriation of language, and an overturning of traditional hierarchies of voice (Lewis 2013).

Mad voices, digital practices, and mobility

Within the new Internet-based media, there has been an emergence of online sites and networks that in a similar vein to mad studies, brings the voices of the mad to the fore. Controversial ‘pro-anna’ sites, for instance, subvert medicalised conceptions of eating disorders, reframing these experiences as an identity position. Likewise, the Hearing Voices Network (see www.intervoice.org) rejects psychiatric conceptualisation of ‘auditory hallucinations’, presenting ‘hearing voices’ as an ordinary and meaningful human experience (Woods 2012). This is not the space here to discuss the potential merits and pitfalls of these online spaces and networks (refer to Dickens et al. 2011; Smith et al. 2013). But I use these examples to demonstrate how voice in new media can work to undermine dominant discourses of mental illness.

It would be technologically deterministic to suggest that such sites and networks are responsible for giving voice in a way that meaningfully destabilises oppressive power relations. Indeed, it might be tempting to praise the new digital media for fostering conditions that enable democratic participation by giving voice to the voiceless (Couldry 2008). But as Carpentier (2011) warns, such celebratory discourses espousing the participatory potential are detached from the political and social context that they are embedded within. Within these contexts, it is important to consider that mad knowledge generated through lived experiences continues to be cast aside in preference for dominant systems of knowledge of mental illness (Coles 2013). Accordingly, there are also numerous online spaces that are dedicated to propagating the medical model of mental illness (Bayliss 2015). And it is precisely this sociocultural context that mad studies and activists must contend with in its work to elevate mad voices. Thus, while new digital media may provide a platform for voice and agency, understanding its potential must take into account the broader sociocultural conditions that can restrict and amplify voices (Couldry 2010).

I propose that digital practices intersect with processes of voice, offering a conceptual tool that can examine the potential of voice in new media. Practices, here, can be defined as routinised and habitual performances based on affective and tacit knowledge and embodied competencies to carry out such actions

(Reckwitz 2002). In terms of *digital* practices I propose that this can involve daily habitual enactments of consuming, producing and sharing online content such as blogs, posts, pictures, music, videos and so on – practices that Lambart (2002) refers to as digital storytelling, and what Couldry (2008) suggests has potential to give voice through enabling self-representation. For digital practices related to madness, I suggest that there is tacit knowledge, and embodied skills that are needed to firstly interact with media devices and interfaces, and secondly to construct and comprehend narratives about madness and/or mental illness.

Here, narratives circulated in digital flows can be understood as forming part of their wider sociocultural conditions, where self-representations of madness are both shaped *by*, and *shape* social and cultural norms. Couldry (2013) explains, that a focus on practices ‘decentres’ the digital, where practices are viewed as an open range of activities that relate to, or are oriented around digital media. Hence, digital practices are not viewed in isolation, but are seen as forming part of what Fuller (2005: 2) describes as a media ecology, which involves the “dynamic inter-relations of processes and objects, beings and things, patterns and matter”. This is important as it allows us to consider how digital practices *related* to madness interact with broader sociocultural contexts, where self-narratives are influenced and are shaped by sociocultural norms.

This allows us to conceptualise how agency and structure can resist and reproduce power through enactments of practices. Pink (2012) points out that De Certeau’s (1998) theory of practice celebrates agency, where ‘consumers’ can negotiate the social world by employing tactics that can resist power within structuring forces in society. In contrast, Pink highlights that Bourdieu’s notion of habitus sees that practices are reproduced through unconscious “internalisation of the social order in the human body” (Eriksen/Nielsen 2001: 130). Adopting a Foucauldian view, this can be seen in the internalisation of disciplinary power within ‘docile’ bodies (Foucault 1975). Although Bourdieu and de Certeau offer diverging perspectives, Pink argues that they reflect a debate regarding whether practices can be understood as resistant or normative. For Pink, practices should not be understood in terms of a maintenance-resistant binary, but as a multiplicity of potential that can reproduce *and* resist power to varying degrees. In term of digital practices, this opens up the scope to examine how differing self-representations can both reproduce and challenge power-laden narratives of mental illness.

The flow and circulation of self-narratives of madness through and within digital spaces can be conceptualised through mobility. This paradigm is concerned with the movement of things, people, and ideas (Sheller 2011). I suggest that there are two core elements of voice here. Firstly, digital practices of voice occur in movement, within and through virtual and physical environments because digital mobile media enables inhabiting and moving through multiple places simultaneously (Pink 2012). Here, the cultural norms of one environment can interact with other contexts. Take for instance, the ethos of the Hearing Voices

Movement, where online representations that normalise hearing voices, can shape daily offline practice related to how one then chooses to respond to auditory hallucinations. The second element of voice is the circulation of self-narratives through digital flows, which allows individuals to not only disseminate stories, but also to encounter the movement of other people, their narratives, information and images, which Urry (2007: 9) explains can “overlap, coincide and converge through digitized flows”.

I propose that the mobilities paradigm, similar to practice theory, can offer an analytical tool to understand multiple potentials of voice in new media. Like practice theory, it provides conceptual scope to consider how the movement of mad voices through and within digitised spaces can reproduce and resist power. As Cresswell (2010) explains, mobility intersects with practice theory. Similar to Pink, Cresswell draws on Bourdieu (1990), to argue that movement is experienced, embodied and internalised. Mobility, like practice then, reflects the internalisation and reproduction of social order and power. In terms of madness, it is disciplinary power of psychiatry that is internalised, which regulates behaviour and reproduces normalised mobile subjects (Foucault 1975).

However, movements can also reject social norms and regulatory power. Entangled with Cresswell’s (2010) notion of practice, are two further elements of mobility: actual movement and the representation of that movement. Here, physical movements are infused with cultural meaning through their cultural representations. Think representations of the untreated mentally ill free to roam in society as threatening, in need of treatment. Conversely, not all movements adhere to the representations that surround them. Representations can be challenged, and encoded with alternative meanings. For instance, mad activists encode ‘mental illness’ as an identity position (Graby 2015). These representations resist dominant understandings of mental illness, which leads to circulation of counter-narratives. Like digital practices then, mobility offers an analytical tool that interrogates voice in a manner that is open to multiple potential. In the following section, I outline how these concepts can be engaged methodologically.

Researching voice through digital ethnography

Building on ethnography, digital ethnography provides methodological tools to examine mad voices in digital media through engaging with digital practices and mobility. It employs ethnographic methods to understand culture, while exploiting the interactivity of digital media within research processes (Buccitelli 2016). Following Couldry (2013), researching digital practices involves paying close attention to the enactments of practices, observing what people actually, *do*, *say* and *feel*. Similarly, researching mobility entails what Sheller and Urry (2006: 217) describe as “observing directly or in digitally enhanced forms mobile bodies undergoing various performances” of movement. Digital ethnography as will be

described, is particularly useful as it creates a *sense* of being with participants, in a way where it is possible to observe their movements through multiple offline-online spaces. This might otherwise difficult to achieve through direct observations (Pink 2012). Though, there may be variations of such approaches. I outline two methods as an example that can facilitate this, of which reflective interviews forms a basis for both approaches.

The use of reflective interviews, as developed by Pink (2012), builds on traditional interviews adding observations of practice and movement. As Pink argues, standard interviews do not allow actual observations of how a practice is performed; therefore they cannot delve into what is experienced, and the tacit knowledge that is evoked during the performance of practice. The use of reflective interviews through observation, specifically seeks to understand the details of practices, and the collective of the “non-verbalised way of knowing that it entails” (Pink 2012: 41). This is particularly useful for exploring how sociocultural norms interact with self-representations of madness.

Specifically, the use of reflective interviews can be used in conjunction with digital media technologies to observe practices and movement. Firstly, this can involve using participants’ digital mobile devices as research probes within interviews. As Gómez Cruz (2016) points out, digital practices performed on personal devices can leave traces of their daily offline-online movements. According to Gómez Cruz, this not only provides representations of a given time, place or event, but they also reveal ‘trajectories’ of individual’s everyday journeys as they move through everyday life. Often overlaid with geo-locative data, these movements can be drawn upon to invite participants to reflect on their digital practices and movements, and the significance these have in exercising voice.

In addition, following Sumartojo (2017) digital technologies can be used to observe practices in motion. This involves inviting participants to film their own digital practices, which can then be viewed with the researcher as part of a reflective interview as described above. Similar, to Gómez Cruz’s (2016), Sumartojo argues that video recordings are not just representations, but a ‘visual trace’ of individuals’ everyday journeys and movements. According to Sumartojo and Pink, these can be viewed with participants, and used as a ‘springboard’ for reflection, and discussion. Sumartojo and Pink add that viewing these visual traces invites empathetic understandings as it emplaces the researchers in a position that allows a close viewing of the embodied experience of participants. In particular, it allows for a close observation of movements associated with performance of practice. By viewing this footage with participants, it can become possible to not only explore self-representations, but also how differing contexts interact to shape self-narratives.

Conclusion

There is a need to develop methodological frameworks that can interrogate the potential of digital mobile media technologies in giving voice to the mad. As I have proposed in this paper, the intersection of digital practices, mobility, and mad studies can open up research possibilities to examine the potential of voice in the new media. It can bring to light how people carry out their daily lives – as it is lived – to reveal how their everyday engagement with, and around digital media can reproduce and challenge oppressive power structures.

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