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Talking Media with 'Online Gods': What Is Academic Podcasting Like?

Ian M Cook

Abstract: What does it mean “to do ethnography” in the “digital age”? Should ethnography become multimodal? The founders of the academic podcast, Online Gods, provide an insight.



We need to talk about what social media is doing to politics, religion, and nationalism. We mean this literally, we really need to talk about it. Certainly, we already think about it a lot. We might see a tweet from a politician that makes us angry, a WhatsApp group message from a family member that makes us re-examine their religiosity, or a Facebook viral video that gives us a new understanding of what our fellow citizens think about their country (whether we like it or not).

And the more we think about it, the more we believe that something fundamentally new is being enabled by emergent digital cultures, and that we need to have conversations about what that means. Since August 2017, we have been running a podcast about just this. Called *Online Gods*, the series explores how the digital is changing the public sphere. Each episode, we first speak to a scholar about a key concept or idea they have worked with or on, and, second, we speak with an “online god,” someone who is using new media in interesting or innovative ways in relation to politics, religion, or national belonging.

Of course, we are not so naïve as to think that change is a one-way street. Sure, social media is changing the world, but we are also aware that the world is changing social media (Miller et al 2016). Existing cultures mould the ways new media works in national, local or global contexts, and thus, new media partly reflects specific contexts and histories even as it engenders

new possibilities. And, we have to admit, it is highly confusing. It is confusing, in part, because the deeply mediated reality that we inhabit is one shaped by connectivity, datafication, omnipresence, differentiation, and high-paced innovation, where the vastness and unknowability of the workings of media infrastructures are making the social structures of our lives less and less transparent (Couldry and Hepp 2018). There is tremendous excitement around new media, but its ubiquity is complex and inescapable at the same time. And that's why we really need to talk.

Dialogical Knowledge Production with Academic Gods

The academic text is a funny thing. We spend years, sometimes decades researching a topic or an idea, we present it, we refine, we write it and, when it is published, sometimes, the conversation stops. If we are lucky, we might get some book reviews or comments, but sometimes the conversation ends. What is lost is all the conversations we had along the way to reach our conclusions and all the conversations that might come afterwards. Not conversations to “promote” the work (we would resist such neo-liberal tendencies), but conversations that keep the ideas running through peoples’ minds (and hopefully out of their mouths and into a podcast format). And we know there is interest in hearing these conversations. With podcasts easily accessible, at least for net-savvy users, we see people from outside academia tuning in to get a feel of the latest thinking on a wide-range of seemingly extraordinarily niche topics.

Conversations are not only discussions about an idea. When they are done best, conversations generate new ideas. Ongoing, open, and rolling podcasts have the possibility of keeping pace with the fast changes, to keep track of ideas as they evolve in relation to the changing mediated world. This is not to say we should reject the traditional ways in which academic research is published. Books and journal articles are great, but they are also different. They are valuable precisely because of the stability of written words as opposed to the fleeting ephemerality of oral conversations. Yet, each has a purpose to serve, and a different appeal. In an era of convergence culture where “old and new media collide” (Jenkins 2006), different appeals and purposes collide and collude with one another, creating new sensory fields of knowledge creation.

As an analogy, think of the ways in which we use different social media platforms. Depending on if we want to engage socially, humorously or politically with different circles of friends, colleagues or groups, we choose to use different platforms: “I just use Facebook for baby pictures and keep my politics on Twitter,” or “I’d never add my colleagues on Instagram, I don’t want them to know about my life, LinkedIn is enough,” and so on. However, just as Twitter has become the place for politics because it is where people started to do politics (that is, we collectively changed the platform through our practices), we can change what podcasting, or maybe “academic podcasting” can be. It does not have to be (just) academics talking to other academics (as wonderful as this can be). Podcasting can also be research.

Researching in Real Time with Online Gods

As anthropologists, we both spend a lot of time talking to people about certain aspects of their lives. We then collect, distil, analyse, re-analyse, theorise, forget, re-check and worry about all the data we gathered doing this, before we finally write. This process is important and useful, but there is also plenty lost along the way that could be revisited or explored. We wanted to capture some of the immediacy and presence of research and put it out there straight away.^[1] We knew it was not only about the time-tested principle of disseminating research, but also something that the digital had enabled us to do.

We wanted to expand ongoing experiments in ethnography—studying people in their lived, meaningful worlds—by using multimodal ways of connecting and conversing. If the people we study do not live their lives by expressing everything in texts, how can research published about them reside only in textual formats?

Digital media have made multimedia engagements even more accessible, following on from the first generation of visual ethnographers who radically transformed the ways researchers connected with people and the cultural spaces they studied. Holding a camera or turning on a recording device for podcasting creates a different sensation within the “research field,” an excitement that a pen and prying academic rarely manage to engender. When we speak to people who know that what they say could potentially reach many more people than the lone researcher before them, they perform, and thus they allow us to explore different layers of mediation that fill up lived worlds with meaning and value. Following media anthropologist Mark Pedelty (2018), we can say that podcasts are yet another way to understand digital culture as a process of becoming, rather than a thing to study.

Moreover, *Online Gods* has encouraged us to inhabit the digital to examine the digital. This has made us keep our ears open to the myriad ways people use digital media to imagine change and compose action. We speak to “online gods” because we want to find out the ways in which people are using social media in pioneering or persuasive ways to engage in the public sphere. Of course, if this were a traditional research project, we would have a much more focused research question, but then this would mean having a much narrower group of podcast guests. Guests who might, understandably, say very similar things. As a researcher, getting a certain amount of repetitive answers is fine, it means you are on the right track, but a podcast listener might soon get bored. This is one of the complications of being part of digital media whilst also researching it.

One other dilemma is about keeping the conversation chatty and accessible, but without losing the rigour of academic knowledge creation. After all, if our podcast is just empty chit-chat, our efforts are wasted. Digital dissemination does not mean we succumb to the pressure to summarise the world in three bullet points. Academic scholarship should provoke and trouble

us, and not just hand over “knowledge” in palatable summaries. There is no easy answer to this dilemma, but we have settled for a style that combines technical words associated with specific areas of research in digital politics with casual conversational language to unpack them. Conversely, we have also tried to take proper research questions into conversations with online users.

Another interesting complication is when we inadvertently step into controversy (as controversy is something social media can amplify significantly). In the podcast, and the wider project of which it is an element, we are looking, in part, at the challenges facing the digitalising public sphere, and whether there is the possibility for dignity in our online discussions. This can mean transgressing the usual social circles in which we find ourselves and speaking to people who we, or our listeners, might not agree with. We received the most complaints when, on our podcast, we spoke with a member of the right-wing Twitterati, as some of our listeners felt that it was wrong to give him a platform. Some commented that we should have intervened and posed critical questions while he described his right-wing vision for the nation. We have maintained that rather than interjecting, what is needed is a nuanced understanding of different perspectives by allowing speakers to say what they see as right and valuable. Outbursts and confrontations have led to a great deal of drama and conflict in our media saturated lives already. We have sought to embrace a style that follows the spirit of anthropology: to listen, understand, and reflect upon. Such an approach is needed to gain insights into why online users say what they say and what meanings they attach to their online actions.

We also found ourselves at the edge of a social media-enabled controversy when our past media partner, HAU Network for Ethnographic Theory, was shaken by anonymous online complaints by former and current staff about working conditions (which then led to a larger critique of the network and its associated journal). Whilst not directly related to the #MeToo movement, the scandal shared some similar mechanisms of protest, and this was in our mind when we covered #MeToo in one of our episodes.

One more challenge has been to find ways to curate and archive the podcast episodes, so that they are available within stable institutional spaces beyond commercial social media networks and the constraints of time-bound project funding. If podcasts have a subversive potential to overturn the hegemonic relationship between knowledge creation and the written word (Llinares et al 2018), it cannot be realised without finding stable institutional repositories that allow easy and continuous access, thus guarding against the ephemerality of spoken words. With several disciplinary associations ready to curate podcasts, we see more promise in this direction. For instance, *Online Gods* is an official podcast partner of the American Anthropological Association, but we also hope to have more institutional partners for wider reach within India, especially if we expand into regional language conversations.

Open Everything

As we move forward with the podcast and keep on learning how to do it better, we want to keep the principles of dignity and openness at the fore. That is to say, we want to highlight the dignity of this type of academic labour (it is serious academic work), whilst also opening up the type of knowledge it produces to a wide audience (and to open up the processes through which we work). There is an openness to every conversation; we do not know where it will go and what ideas will emerge from it. As social media keeps reshaping, and is reshaped by, contemporary politics, religious practices and nationalist discourses, we need to keep on talking about it. And we will.

Endnotes:

[1] We do edit the interviews, but mostly for length or clarity.

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