The Inchoate Field of Digital Offline

A Reflection on Studying Mobile Media Practices of Digital Subalterns in India

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Abstract

This article reflects on studying mobile phones as digital technologies, while much of the scholarly preoccupation thus far has been to study them as communication technologies. Based on the doctoral study on subaltern users and their mobile media digital practices in India, it discusses some of the theoretical issues and outlines methodological possibilities while entering the field. It makes distinction between the theoretical orientations of techno-sociality and sociality of technology, and highlights the significance of adopting the latter to study new socialities that are emerging due to human interaction with technology. It discusses some challenges of doing qualitative research in new media contexts and suggests measures for overcoming them. In this regard, it reviews the suitability of virtual ethnography and participant observation as methodological approaches to mobile phones. While the popular trend has been to resort to technologised tools of data collection and processing (even within qualitative research in new media and digital technologies) this article suggests and discusses the usefulness of a more basic, yet powerful method of long interview to study users and document their practices. It concludes how such a choice can also be regardful of some ethical issues involved in studying user practices on mobile phones.

Introduction

Mobile phones have become such an integral part of our lives that it is hard to imagine a life without them. Since their inception, mobile phones have not just been phones. Even the most basic feature phones came with options for storing contact numbers, clock, calendar, games, etc. A glimpse at the technological history of mobile phones tells us that they were always modelled along the lines of personal digital assistants and were meant for uses other than communication. Parallel advances in telecommunication technology made it possible to access the Internet through phones. Improvements and innovations in data storage technologies further augmented their capacity. Data sharing protocols such as Bluetooth

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allowed users to transfer files among devices. Most of us remember Nokia phones which created a rage in the market in their heyday by incorporating entertainment features. Phones replaced walkmans as technologies of mobile listening (O'Hara and Brown 2006; Goggin 2006). FM radio was very much part of the basic feature phone even from its very early days. Soon, video technologies were integrated into phones. Simultaneous innovations in the domain of computing united the analogue world through the process of digitisation. Phones today stand for a whole media infrastructure through which the digital (including the virtual) universe on the web can be accessed. Their affordability and slightly easier interface compared to computers make them the most popular among users, especially among the less educated masses who have limited technological access. Smartphone technology has thrived and has seen exuberant growth in the recent years. It is no wonder they are touted as the future of digital technology. One device offering so much makes scholars studying media forms wonder if the term 'phone' is just a misnomer for this technological complex, opening up multiple avenues for theoretical pursuit.

My doctoral study in the city of Bangalore in India starts with such a consideration of mobile phones as a digital media complex and infrastructure that have ushered in not only a communication revolution (Jeffrey and Doron 2013) but also a digital revolution. More than 70 per cent of Indian users have discovered and entered the digital frontier through mobile phone interfaces. The diffusion and spread of this technology has been unprecedented in the Indian media context. Mobile phones have completely changed the socio dynamics of access to digital technologies in India. A majority of users, especially those coming from the marginal sections of the population have not had any exposure to computers and other digital technologies. Feature phones which are available in the range of 1000 to 2000 rupees (approximately twenty dollars) are still popular with users, especially with the less educated and the marginalised sections. The market for used smart phones is also very large and it caters to the marginalised users. This article reflects on studying such mobile phone users and their media practices in Bangalore, outlines methodological challenges, and discusses possibilities for such a study.

Studying mobile media practices of digital subalterns

Of late, mobile phones have received exclusive attention from media scholars. Phone and communication studies (see edited volume by Katz 2008) are slowly gaining traction as a separate branch within media studies. Goggin (2011) suggests that we treat mobile phones as a separate medium altogether. Although I do not entirely subscribe to the notion of mobile phones as a separate medium and only consider them as extensions of "the digital", I acknowledge the importance of noticing the difference between mobile phones and other computing technolo-

gies. As scholarship on mobile phones gradually gains prominence, there is more than ever a need to think about methodological strategies that suit phones, not just as communication technologies but also as digital technologies. The available literature does not shed enough light on methodological approaches that can be adopted to study mobile phones and the practices specific to them, especially with regard to qualitative research.

Two distinct trends are noticeable with respect to qualitative research within media studies on digital technologies. The methods scholars adopt are also very predictable following these trends. The studies that focus on people and societal aspects often resort to ethnographic methods, and those which theorise about the medium and its nature take philosophical and interpretative approaches (Hiller 2015). Christine Hine (2000), Wilson and Peterson (2002), Gabriella Coleman (2010) have reviewed the studies that have adopted ethnographic approaches to virtual communities. Studies reviewed by them either look at digital technologies in association with well-defined groups or communities or look at new communities formed around technological use such as geeks, hackers, etc. Even though they address the technological aspects specific to such communities; elaborate on the method of online or virtual ethnography; indicate ways to study technological structures and objects within them, it takes an encounter with the field one wants to study to see how methodologically inadequate one feels to tackle the complexity of the phenomenon of technological use. Often ethnographic methods (even the updated ones that suit new technological environments) are not enough to capture the inchoate, yet patterned practices, especially when they are not contained on an online platform such as Facebook or YouTube. Platforms structure practices in specific ways and the structure itself makes it easier to navigate them during study. However, methods useful on online platforms are not always suitable for offline practices. My research work in Bangalore engages with the much neglected domain of digital offline and the practices that are prevalent there.

I document and study media practices of users I call "digital subalterns" for my doctoral research. My fieldwork in Bangalore involves working with taxi drivers, auto rickshaw drivers, security guards, vegetable vendors and other low end informal sector urban working populations. Many such users are not connected to the Internet all the time. Their phone use is mostly offline.[1] Among

1 This is slowly changing due to new schemes introduced by telecom service providers in India. Recently, most telecom service providers have been providing data packages up to a GB per day. Reliance (one of the prominent telecom service providers) introduced Jio, the cheapest telecom network which forced other players in the market to slash down data service charges. Now most service providers offer up to 1 GB data download per day on 3G and 4G network subscriptions. This has automatically increased users' presence online. However, many users consume a lot of already downloaded media content (especially full length regional feature films) due to network interruptions and data download limits on their subscriptions.

many of their activities on phones, multimedia consumption is the most popular. Audio and video consumption via phones is integral to their mode of work which is interspersed with long stretches of waiting and idle time (Rashmi M. 2017). It occupies their empty time. They engage in an entire spectrum of offline practices such as using phones as group devices, sharing media content via Bluetooth and other sharing protocols, exchanging and swapping memory cards loaded with films, procuring media content through small mobile phone shops that offer currency and repair services (unauthorised distribution of media content by side-loading onto memory cards and pen drives etc.). All these practices merit documentation and study as they have a huge influence on both telecommunication and content industries in India. Moreover, the academic discourse is slightly skewed towards those users who are savvy with technology and have means, skills and literacy to participate fully in the new media environment. My research on the digital subalterns in Bangalore is a small attempt to balance this pervasive trend.

Image 1: A typical mobile phones shop frequented by subaltern users for buying currency and media content.

Theoretical and methodological challenges of studying digital offline

A user's interaction with the phone is private and not readily available for observation, especially so when it is offline and steeped in extra legality, as in the case of the subaltern users in India. The interaction is also social in terms of interactivity and commonality among users. The time-tested and classic ethnographic methods, which are otherwise ideal for studying groups and their practices, are not suitable

for this context. There is a dearth of studies which look at digital offline, hence very few examples to emulate. Additionally, there is an ethical obligation to respect the privacy of users. The chances for immersive ethnography and observation are very thin in such field contexts. A common strategy (one that is usually practised) to overcome this lack in qualitative methods is to technologise the method itself and resort to computerised tools of data collection and processing. It works if one is working within the framework of a particular platform, governed by algorithmic processes. Coding and designing programmes to extract data may make a researcher's job easier in such instances.[2] However, they may not be of much help if one were to encounter a field of offline technological practices which are so inchoate that they cannot be contained within platforms or algorithmic frames. One has to improvise methods to study practices that are platform independent.

Another aspect that requires attention is the temporality of media practices based on use. Observing the trend within digital media technologies, it is noticeable that the initial adoption and use have received more attention than later uses. It is not just initial use, but also initial users, who thus catch our attention. We often presume that the users and use of the medium will more or less remain the same. We, therefore, give very little attention to what happens to a medium when embraced by larger masses and different kinds of users. The later adoptions of a technology may not be similar to its initial ones. And the use might significantly vary across groups of users, especially so in the case of a versatile medium of digital technologies. Although, there are studies which discuss media use among different groups of users making distinctions based on age, gender and nationality (which are identity based distinctions), the existent literature rarely mentions later uses of the technology as it gets diffused. Such considerations of time will enrich our accounts of media use, and also show how innovations and developments over time are responses to several ways in which different kinds of users adopt the medium to their needs. In this regard, I identify two kinds of approaches within media theory that study technological change – techno-sociality and the sociality of technology.

Techno-sociality

The studies which discuss social change instituted by technological innovation are mostly influenced by the orientation that medium theory propounds. The theoretical focus within medium focused theories has ascribed unbridled power to technology and has made it determine human condition (for example, Kittler 1999). Clearly, technological innovations bring social change. But how we concep-

2 Richard Rogers through Digital Methods Initiative (DMI) advocates the need for such tools and programmes to study objects and practices native to digital medium.

tualise this change has a huge impact on the theories we end up with. For instance, if technology is treated as an external force acting upon the social structures and changing it, rather than as a force emerging from within the social, it is likely we end up with a technologically deterministic medium theory. Medium focused theories within media studies have always discussed change from a purely technological point of view, and have mostly neglected the people who define use for those technologies. Nick Couldry (2012) comments on this trend within media theory and advocates a socially oriented theory which will visibilise people behind it, instead of considering a medium as an abstract force acting on a pre-existing social structure.

I understand the early spate of studies as assessing the impact of digital media forms on "the pre-defined social". Such studies highlighted the ruptures caused by the entry of a new technology on community, nation, race, gender, etc. Some of these studies have been compiled in the four volumes edited by David Bell (2006). In an earlier work, Bell (2001) inaugurates the trend of doing cyberculture studies. These studies examine change at the intersection of society and technology. Scholars in this line of research investigated changes which were *caused* by technological innovations.

While it is useful to register these developments, our understanding of change can do better if we were to examine it not in a unidirectional mode of technology acting on social forms, but as change resulting from social use of a particular technology. This, I understand as the major difference between the orientations I differentiate as techno-sociality and sociality of technology. There is a need for a sociological focus which balances out technologisation with the humanisation of media experience. In this article I try to articulate what it is to map the sociality of technology.

Sociality of technology

Working with the awareness that technology, regardless of its novelty, is already embedded within the social helps us see – how at each moment of its life in the world, a media technology gets defined and redefined by uses various users put it into. A medium is thus defined by its use. That use is neither constant nor singular, but always plural and changing. Such an orientation will help us see different kinds of users who define the medium by their use (which does not necessarily match the intended uses at the time of technological innovation). As important as it is to study the use, it is equally essential to study the different kinds of users, know their life contexts and needs and then understand why they use the technologies they chance upon in specific ways. Mapping such diversity across time and groups will help us draw the sociality of a medium. There are no predetermined uses for a technology, neither are there one set of users. It is possible to distinguish users not just based on their social and biological identity, but also by

the ways in which they use technology. Such a use-based distinction of users can be one of the important steps towards tracing different and new socialities constituted by the medium.

Recent studies in Science and Technology Studies (STS) and anthropology of science and technology are useful pointers to articulate what a study of sociality of technology would entail. Bruno Latour's idea of actor network theory (2005) provides some useful suggestions in this regard. Following Latour and his proposition of the social as a domain inclusive of the material (the world of objects hitherto classified as non-social), the separate treatment of the technological divorced from the social is very problematic. Such an approach has wide ranging implications for media theory. It becomes possible to conceptualise the social and the technological as co-constitutive domains and not fall into the trap of either kind of over-determinism. Media practices associated with use thus become objects and focus of research, as they are useful entry points to map the sociality instituted by a new technology. Studying practices also serves another purpose – they show how social use shapes the course of technology in concrete ways.

Long-interview method

Keeping in mind the theoretical and methodological issues discussed above, I argue that the method of the long interview (McCracken 1988) is suitable to study mobile media practices of the digital offline. Long interview method as propounded by McCracken (1988) is conceptualised as a substitute to immersive ethnographic interviews. It can generate the rich qualitative data that methods such as participant observation can do. Since it is stretched over time and can be done in multiple sittings, it allows the interviewer to establish a rapport with the interviewee (like in ethnographic interviews), while at the same time being "less intrusive". Through this method, it is possible to construct the life worlds of interviewees and look for categories specific to a culture. In this method, the interviewer lets the interviewee speak at length around the topic of research. It also has advantages over guided questionnaire, as it puts the interviewee at ease and allows the gradual unfolding of narratives on the topic.

I asked users to speak about phones in their lives, the uses they put them into and the activities they engage in while using phones. I analysed the documented narratives to understand the nature and use of the medium. As a method, it was less intrusive, more ethical and transparent than the technologised tools to document and study human interaction, especially with private and personal media technologies such as mobile phones. Users who were uncomfortable sharing details of their activities on phones such as consumption of pornographic material, gradually revealed details when they were generally encouraged to speak on their daily activities. Such details were mentioned casually during conversations, but users I interviewed went quiet if I asked further probing questions. Not

asking direct questions about certain questionable practices immensely helped me to understand the private interaction of users with phones and trace the distinct aspects of networks through which they sourced and circulated media content. Knowing about their social situation (extracted from the details they shared about their employment, income, neighbourhoods they lived in, villages and towns they migrated from) helped me construct their life world and situate their media use in the larger urban circumstance.

Long interview method is very conducive to study platform independent offline interaction of users with their phones, as users themselves report what they do. It is important to note that digital traces left offline are not as easily accessible as they are online. The only way to access them is by examining users' phones (which users will be highly uncomfortable sharing) which might sabotage the opportunities for research. In such circumstances, the most ethical way to access this rich pool of offline practices is only when users willingly and consciously part with that information. Although laborious and time consuming, the long interview method is the most effective and ethical of methods to bring out the sociality of technology: as it is easier to cull out the life context, mental universe and specific practices of users from interview narratives.

Conclusion

In this essay, I highlight the importance of studying mobile phones as a digital technology, especially among subaltern users who are not usually the focus of academic discourse on media technologies. I emphasise the importance of inchoate digital offline practices in relation to such users. I argue that the long interview method can be a very effective qualitative research method in capturing the materiality as well as the sociality of user interaction with phones, even though it appears simple. Letting users themselves speak about the technologies they use makes it possible to extract material aspects of the medium in ways that are not possible through a strict technical understanding of the medium or through data extraction tools. In fact, complementing user narratives with technical understanding through secondary sources produces data sets that give unique perspective into media use as practiced on the ground. Market data of media use also can be another valuable resource in this regard. It allows one to historically track the evolution of technology in response to media use.

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