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Escaping the everyday:

Young people's use of text messages and songs

BY JAYDE CAHIR & ANN WERNER

The subject of this paper is research that explored how young people use text messages and songs stored on their mobiles and MP3 players to escape everyday life. Two separate research studies from Australia and Sweden were juxtaposed because of the similarities in findings as well as the similarity between these cultural objects. The various types of escape that were found were part of everyday routine and experienced in short bursts, such as the length of time it takes to re-read a text message or to listen to a song. However, there were also more extreme examples of these devices being used to temporarily retreat from everyday social interaction. The authors argue that these forms of escape seem to be necessary for young people to be able to maintain a “sense of being” (as defined by Heidegger in 1962) in their everyday life.

Portable communication and media devices, such as mobile phones and MP3 players and, more recently, the smartphone, with its access to text messaging, music and the internet, are becoming omnipresent and penetrating, and changing the experience of everyday life. This is particularly true among young people, who are early adopters of digital media. Young people are major consumers of mobile technologies but, as well as being frequent users, they are also considered symbolically linked to cutting-edge technology because they are young

(McPherson 2008; Haddon & Vincent 2009).

This may be one reason why there is a growing field of empirical research on young people's use of mobile devices, which mainly addresses the social functions and cultural significance of these technologies (Bull 2000, 2007). Inspired by contemporary theories of social networks and cultural practices, various international studies have investigated how young people interact with mobile devices (Urry 2007; Green & Haddon 2009; Haddon & Vincent 2009), while others have explored the affective dimension of cultural

practices like media technologies and music in everyday life (Grossberg 1984; DeNora 2000). This article turns to what might be considered as the “inside” experience, by investigating how young people in Australia and Sweden experience text messages and songs stored on their mobiles and MP3 players. Dealing with two examples – text messages stored on mobiles and songs contained in MP3 players – we recognise that these mediate different experiences, and yet the relationship people have to the content of each device is similar, as both can offer a sense of “being”. We propose that an essential element of maintaining a sense of “being” is the capacity to “escape” momentarily. We explore how text messages and songs are used to escape everyday life from two perspectives: engagement with memories and avoidance of social interactions.

‘Being-in-the-world’: Everyday use of digital text and song recordings

Martin Heidegger’s phenomenology of being is primarily concerned with “human existence”, which he refers to as *Dasein*, and the most basic form is “being-in-the-world”. Heidegger claims there are different ways of “being-in-the-world” and provides the following examples:

... having to do with something, producing something, attending to something and looking after it, making use of something, giving something up and letting it go, undertaking, accomplishing, ascertaining, interrogating, observing, discussing, determining (1962, p.56).

Heidegger refers to these diverse modes of “being” as not only practical forms of behaviour, but also the action of “doing” something “to” something or “with” something. We will relate how things are used or employed, in the broadest sense, to the action of keeping and re-reading text messages, as well as storing and listening to songs, to argue that these forms of escape

can provide a sense of “being”. The sense of “being” that Heidegger theorises is also located in the continuity of certain actions, such as the repetitiveness of re-reading a collection of text messages or listening to the same songs continually. An ontological reality through the everyday use of technologies involves active engagement in the world, which is physical, cognitive and affective. It is physical, as it requires bodily presence, it is cognitive because it involves memory and reflectivity, but it is also affective, since relationships to material objects are grounded in unconscious processes and sustained through the mobile devices’ portability and accessibility (Silverstone 1993).

It is argued that memory materialises through “sensori-motor systems” organised by habit and independent recollections, thus memories of past experiences can appear unsolicited or be intentionally evoked by the senses (Bergson cited in van Dijck 2004). There is also a cumulative dimension to this experience – “the ontological depth” of material objects often exists in the accumulation of these objects (Noble 2004, p.233). Everyday accumulative practices of storing particular text messages and songs on mobiles and MP3 players to be read or listened to on a daily basis offer reliable access to archives of memories through the sensory experiences of reading or listening.

We propose that the various modes of “being” articulated above, specifically how things are used or employed, extend to the notion of escape. Pastimes and tourism are often associated with the notion of escape (Rojek 1993); however, our research demonstrates that there is a method of escape that can be an everyday routine and experienced in a short burst, such as the length of time it takes to re-read a text message or to listen to a song. A research study in the United Kingdom revealed how text messages or songs are used to “hide” when in shared social spaces, by either communicating

with the “absent other” or when listening to songs using earphones. When engaging in these activities, people are comfortably disengaged from their surroundings (Bull 2000, 2007). The main difference is that the earphones attached to the MP3 player can block out much of the auditory experiences of the shared social space with the person’s choice of sound, whereas the use of a mobile to send, receive or re-read text messages affords a temporary retreat into the user’s own social worlds. The everyday use of mobiles and MP3 players (formerly Walkmans and more recently smartphones) reveals how people tend to employ these devices to create a sense of privacy as a form of boundary regulation in shared social spaces (du Gay et al. 1997; Bull 2007). Using these devices to retreat into “solitary worlds” is mentioned in these research studies but there is no connection with the notion of “escape” or the various forms it can assume in young people’s everyday lives. The common practice of re-reading and collecting text messages or accumulating and listening to songs with the purpose of escaping will be analysed from two perspectives: short bursts of withdrawing into the past, and creating a “way out” of social interactions.

Our research studies

Both studies were part of larger research projects designed to produce an extensive analysis of, respectively, the everyday uses of text messaging, and young women’s uses of music. The Swedish study analysed gendered aspects of music, as well as music use in everyday life (Werner 2009); however, gender is not explored in this article, instead the focus is on the practice of escape. Mobiles and MP3 players are popular cultural objects. We believe that it is constructive to juxtapose our respective research projects, particularly considering the similarities in our results, as well as the similarity between these devices: their mobility, their appeal among young

people and their longevity as prized cultural objects. We have used pseudonyms throughout this paper to ensure participants’ confidentiality.

The Australian research on text messaging took place between December 2006 and April 2007 using the qualitative research methodology of one-on-one interviews in person. Two forms of non-probability sampling were employed: convenience and snowballing. Seventeen women and 13 men were recruited through either email chains or by a referral on completion of the interview. An interview guide was used to stimulate conversation about the participants’ text messaging practices and opinions on the technology. The same topics were raised in each interview; however, because the interviews were based on open-ended questions, the duration of each interview ranged from 30 minutes to two hours. Prerequisites for inclusion in the sample were: prior knowledge of how to send and receive text messages, being between the ages of 18 and 40 years and living in Sydney, although, for this paper, only empirical data from 19- to 22-year-olds was used.

The Swedish research on the everyday uses of music was conducted between November 2005 and June 2006. Fieldwork included focus groups, individual interviews, participant observation and chatting online with a group of 24 girls, aged 14 to 16 years. They all lived in a medium-sized Swedish town and attended two community high schools during the research period. All research participants were volunteers recruited during the researchers’ visits to their schools. The participants constituted a socially and ethnically mixed group in order to investigate different issues of gender, class and ethnicity in girls’ relation to music. Methods used were inspired by ethnography and reception studies, thus the study involved returning to the participants several times in different settings. The interviews addressed multiple subject areas relating to the participants’ tastes and their uses of music.

Escaping into the past: Memories attached to text messages and songs

During the Sydney interviews on text messaging, the participants were asked to choose sample text messages (both “sent” and “received” messages) and to explain the contents of each. When contextualising their chosen text messages, the participants’ reflections revealed how messages were sometimes used to escape into the past. As participant Adam explained:

I have this message on my phone “U shld have stayed as u dont believe whr the night brought us”. It was a message that I got from a friend when I was travelling in Barcelona ... I have many, many messages from when I was overseas ... I only have a few spots for messages so when I get one now I just delete it straight away because I like to keep my overseas messages. I like to keep them for that reason, to go back and check them out. (Adam, 22)

Adam had only returned to Sydney from Europe two months prior to the interview. Adam’s collection of overseas text messages seemed to offer an escape from the daily grind. His anthology of overseas text messages is similar to the accumulation of objects within the domestic sphere. It is argued that as “we accumulate objects, we accumulate being” (Noble 2004, p.233). The appropriation of mass-produced objects through acts of personalisation and the accumulation of objects, including what those objects contain, is not a series of discrete experiences but has an ongoing cumulative effect (Noble 2004). Adam’s overseas text messages have a cumulative effect, as they are evidence of a collection of experiences that cannot be separated. Adam’s practice of escaping to his overseas trip by re-reading the text messages stored on his mobile is not a dissimilar experience to listening to certain songs stored on MP3

players on a regular basis as a means of escape.

In the Swedish research project, participant Anna describes listening to a certain music group on spring mornings when it is sunny, before rising out of bed to get ready for school. She says:

They remind me a lot of many friends of mine that listen to this [type of music]. We hung out in [name of place] for a while only listening to this kind of music. I like listening to it. It reminds me of there, of summer. I play it to get a feeling of summer. When I’m in bed in the morning and the sun shines in, then I turn up the hip-hop songs. (Anna, 16)

The particular song and group Anna talks about is from an obscure independent Swedish hip-hop group of young male artists. Hip-hop is not one of Anna’s favourite genres of music, but listening to the song reminds her of the good times she had one summer with a group of friends. Tonkiss (2003) argues that sounds can displace us – a familiar sound can make you believe you are somewhere else. This sensory experience of displacement is used purposely by Anna to re-experience the past summer and the times she spent with friends who live on the other side of town. During that summer she listened to several hip-hop songs while having a pleasurable time at parties with these friends. Anna uses these particular songs to trigger a certain memory and a feeling of pleasure. Music can, on one level, even function as a ritual; in this case, each morning of spring, Anna is able to escape back to the previous summer (Dissanayake 2006). From Dissanayake’s position, ritual can have a compulsive aspect to it, which can be profoundly comforting, as the memory is kept alive by repeatedly listening to a particular song.

Participants either kept and re-read certain text messages or listened to particular songs as a way of “holding onto” a memory. There is a physical and sensory relationship between people and

objects whereby the objects are felt, seen, smelled or heard and this sensory experience brings forth memories (van Dijck 2004) or the experience of being somewhere else (Tonkiss 2003). During the interviews on text messaging it was evident that some participants kept certain text messages to carry a memory of a person:

I had a friend who died of leukaemia in Year 12 at school and that was really hard so no-one would delete the messages that he had sent us because it was kind of like a way of holding on. (Eva, 19)

There is a cumulative dimension in Eva's narrative. During the interview, Eva revealed that escaping into the past throughout the grieving process was a way of coping with the loss of a friend. The messages provided evidence of her friend being a part of her and their mutual friends' world. Diverse modes of "being", according to Heidegger (1962), refer not only to behaviours, but also to the act of "doing" something "to" something or "with" something. Text messages can, in this case, be experienced as often or as seldom as Eva and her friends would like, through reliable access to the content on their mobiles. The proximity of the object provides memories within reach. The knowledge that her friend's text messages are easily accessible offers a material connection to the past, present and future through the act of "holding on". This physical and symbolic act of "holding on" is made possible through the technological capacities of the mobile (and similarly the MP3 player), as young people can carry hundreds of conversations (or songs) in their pocket.

Escaping social interaction: Practices of avoiding communication

There is a necessity to escape everyday life in short bursts in order to maintain a sense of "being". Evidence of escape is located not

only in memories, but also in the way young people use the technology in their everyday lives. Our participants spoke of using text messages and songs to amuse themselves, contact others or to retreat into their own world when in shared social spaces. Bull (2007) discusses urban connectivity and the uses of favoured technologies, like mobiles or iPods, while commuting. It is a common-enough occurrence to see young people using their mobile to interact with the "absent other" in shared social spaces, as Emma explains:

... I have to admit, I'm one of those people who automatically, when I go to a bar, a café or something and I'm waiting for somebody, the first thing that I do is pull out my phone and start playing with my messages ... (Emma, 20)

Emma is describing how she uses her mobile to fill in time. In her confessional are two suppositions: her habit of taking out her mobile to "play" with her text messages and, in general, how this is a common practice. By playing with her text messages, she is using the mobile as a toy to keep herself busy. Emma is not completely disengaged with her surroundings, because she can refocus her attention at any stage, but she is assuming a non-communicative interaction with her surrounding environment as she is engaged with the "absent other" (Bull 2007). Many research studies have indicated that when some people are alone they will write a text message and, moreover, they liken their mobile to having a close friend at hand (Bull 2007; Green & Haddon 2009). However, having a mobile device with which she can access social networks or "play" with text messages allows Emma to escape momentarily from the surrounding environment.

A more extreme way of escaping social interaction using a favoured technology is apparent in the Swedish study of teenage girls' use of music when participant Saga

curls up in the corridors of the school with her MP3 player. By doing so, she escapes from the social interaction of the school milieu:

For me, the music is magic, it reminds me of a place I haven't been but where I want to go, somewhere else ... I don't care about too many of them [school mates] because I'm always sitting with my MP3 and, like, looking at the ground. (Saga, 14)

Saga's embodied practice of listening to mediated music can be done anywhere, but it is within the school that she wants to escape from the world. The content of the music she listens to holds significance for her – it is magical – as is her experience of a different place than the one she is in. Popular music can be considered as an articulation “on two levels: signification and affect” (Grossberg 1992, p.79). The music Saga listens to helps her escape through both levels – the lyrical content of the rock and Goth music she favours is often about mythical places, and her affective relation to the music is expressed as a sense of being free to roam. Through lyrical representations and affective embodiment, the music provides Saga with this form of escape. Music use, both performing and listening, always involves embodied practices (Shannon 2006). These practices are affective, as well as being Saga's tool for leaving the social environment in spirit, although she still plays a part in the school milieu: that of the grumpy teenager dressed in black sitting in a corner. Saga's embodiment is a resistant presence, in the form of a closed, curled-up mass.

Our empirical data on escaping social interaction within shared social spaces was not limited to Emma and Saga. Other young people interviewed also used text messages as a way of avoiding unwanted phone conversations and, in some cases, they even turned off their mobiles to circumvent all contact. Other international research studies (Baron 2008; Green & Haddon

2009) have also found that young people use mobiles to control connectivity. The technology and its everyday use “extend the physical circumstances under which communication is initiated and received” (Baron 2008, p.178), and at times this availability seems to become too much. In the Australian study, an “escape” was achieved by two male participants by switching off their mobiles. This is a rather extreme way of avoiding the expected reciprocity involved in everyday social interactions; the practice of blocking potential social interaction with acoustic sound was more common.

Our computer is in the living room so it's like, a bit hard to listen ... So I usually put on my MP3 player. I think better with music. (Billie, 15)

Everyday social interactions can be circumvented by inserting earpieces and switching on an MP3 player, particularly when in shared social spaces such as the bus or train (du Gay et al. 1997; Bull 2000, 2007). Billie's comment extends this practice to include the domestic sphere, as it is a usual practice for her to sit in the living room with her MP3 player on, avoiding communication with her parents and siblings who are also in this shared space. This form of escape seems to offer Billie time for contemplation and reflection, as she thinks “better with music” and likes to do her homework this way, or chat to her friends on MSN using the family computer. The use of sound to build personal spaces within daily life was analysed in the context of the city by Bull (2000, 2007); however, practices such as these in the domestic space are dissimilar experiences since the people in the room are part of a family unit, unlike fellow commuters in Bull's study. The need to escape extends to escaping not only from strangers, but also from close family and friends, either through turning off a mobile or tuning out by inserting the earpieces of an MP3 player.

Conclusions

In the empirical examples discussed, a range of everyday experiences indicates how the participants use text messages and songs as means of escape. We found that participants used their mobile devices to escape into the past through memories triggered by sight or sound and to create ways out of social interactions. In short, the participants used these mobile devices to escape into the past as well as from the present. These forms of escape provide a pleasurable sense of “being-in-the-world”, as they facilitate individual needs instantaneously, irrespective of the situation or location. Future research could explore in more depth why young people need to escape everyday life through the use of mobile devices in order to maintain a sense of self. This research will only increase in importance as the technological possibilities for communication increase. The implications of these developments include a possible increase in young people’s need to escape, but also an expansion in the ways in which their escape is achieved. As technological capacities enlarge, the blurring of domesticity, work and leisure continues, and the busyness of everyday life expands, short bursts of escape will continue to be necessary to maintain a sense of “being”.

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