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Theorising the Practice and Ethics of 'Listening' in Online Ethnography

Rachel Winter and Anna Lavis

Abstract

There are debates across disciplines regarding how to research and represent digital cultures ethically. Against this background, there is a need to reflect on the practice and ethics of online ethnography. Ambiguities surrounding researcher "participation" online have led this to be equated largely with observation. This has deprivileged the act of listening in both research practice and the methodological and ethical debates that underpin this. Utilizing ethnographic research into self-harm and social media as a critical lens, this article advocates for listening as a mode of participating in, as well as observing, online spaces. In proposing "active listening" and "adaptive listening" to explore the polyphonic and heterogeneous nature of social media, we argue that listening is key to representing online spaces in all their cultural diversity and emotional complexity. Reflecting on listening is necessary to forging a practical ethics of online ethnography, and is relevant to digital research more widely.

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Introduction

Ethnography has been increasingly adopted by researchers across varied disciplines to study virtual spaces and communities. From anthropology (Horst & Miller, 2012); Lavis, 2017) , to information studies (Rotman, Preece, He, & Druin, 2012), to education (Kulavuz-Onal & Vásquez, 2013), it has been utilised to gather in-depth understandings of digital cultures and social media interactions.

With its origins in anthropology, ethnography is a methodology that explores people's behaviours, experiences and beliefs in cultural and social context. It aims to construct an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon from the perspective of participants (Erickson, 1984). Participant observation - observing and participating in the daily lives of participants – is a hallmark of ethnography (Scott Jones & Watt, 2010). However, the parametres of participant observation are a longstanding topic of debate. In particular, it has been argued that, even in offline contexts, ethnography tends to privilege observation above other forms of data collection such as listening, and that this risks making ethnography and observation equivalent terms (Forsey, 2010). Against this background, there has been a recent call for researchers to ensure that they "explicitly *account for* the senses" (Pink, 2009, p. 10) through "self-consciously and reflexively attending to the senses throughout the research process" (ibid. p. 10). This call for sensory ethnography has implicitly drawn a consideration of listening back into reflections on the method, but to date this discussion has not been extended to ethnography in online spaces.

What it is meant by an ethnography of the Internet has evolved over the past two decades. Early Internet ethnographies separated online and offline realities, researching individuals' interactions with online spaces by observing them in offline settings. This gave a portrait of online spaces as "continuous with and embedded in other social spaces" (Miller & Slater, 2000, p. 5) but it also retained an imaginary of a "schism between online and offline realities" (Robinson & Schulz, 2009, p. 686). In contrast, in her early work Hine (2000) argued that cyberspace was "a place where people do things" (p. 21) in which we can "study just exactly what it is they do, and why, in their terms, they do it" (ibid. 21). She thereby advocated for virtual spaces to be recognised as field sites in their own right, where researchers could study online communities and cultures. This underpinned a now-widely-accepted view of digital spaces as cultural; they can be understood as places where people who share the same values, customs, or practices gather (Deuze, 2006). In his work, Kozinets extended these discussions of online ethnography by reflecting on what he termed "netnography" as "participant-observational research" (Kozinets, 2010, p. 19). Based predominantly on observing textual discourse (Kozinets, 2002), this firmly framed online

ethnography as an observational practice. Whilst such an equation of online ethnography with observation must be understood in relation to the nature of cyberspace itself - in that its beginnings were textual - online spaces are now multi-sensory, and they include the prominent use of images, emojis and videos alongside text.

In response to these changes, a growing body of literature has used ethnography to explore these different media of expression simultaneously, such as in Naslund et al's 2014 study of *YouTube*. Ethnographers have also adopted the practice of producing content in line with their participants to further understand their experiences (Robinson & Schulz, 2009). These varied approaches illustrate that the rapid evolution in the forms of expression enabled by the Internet has led ethnographers to develop and reassess methods of data collection (Robinson & Schulz, 2009). We suggest that there is a particular need to draw a consideration of listening back into this process of reflection. When asking "What does an ethnographer do?" Cohen and Rapport (1995, p. 12) answer, "above all, they listen". Social science research more widely has argued that listening is an "art" (Back, 2007) that is central to understanding how societies work, and cultures are transmitted. Yet, to date this core principle of the method has been largely left out of methodological and ethical discussions of online ethnography.

The necessity of paying attention to listening is drawn to the fore by considering the dynamics of social media. Although many textured and still often textual, online spaces are "polyphonic" (Bakhtin, 1984); they are composed of "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices" (ibid. p. 6). Purdy (1997, p. 1) argues that: "communication has two dimensions: speaking (expression), and listening (reception)." Social media is commonly framed as a space for expression, where people share their opinions (Whiting & Williams, 2013) such as those on politics (Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux, & Zheng, 2014), or their feelings, such as suicidal thoughts (Robinson, et al., 2016). However, as well as facilitating this breadth of expression – of speech – online spaces also enable such articulations to be *listened* to. This listening, moreover, is a key mode of participating in social media, and as central to producing its communities and spaces as speaking. This prompts a reflection on how little attention has been paid to listening-as-participation.

In the small amount of existing literature on listening in virtual research, listening has been employed "as a metaphor for paying attention online" (Crawford, 2009, p. 525) and Crawford also argues that it has been "overlooked as a critical element of online participation" (Crawford, 2011,

p. 63). Yet, it has been previously established that a common role adopted in online engagement is that of a 'lurker'; this involves listening to others' statements without posting a response (Crawford, 2011). Whilst acknowledging the presence of 'lurkers' as participants in online spaces goes some way to recognising listening *as* participation, these previous discussions of listening all pertain to conversations amongst social media *users*. There is therefore a need to go further than this to also consider how *researchers* can and should listen online, as this "metaphor" is translated into ethical research practice. In this paper, we argue that listening is necessary to online ethnography precisely because it allows a researcher to participate in, not just observe, online spaces. By facilitating a mode of data collection that mirrors how participants themselves use social media, such as when 'lurking', listening goes beyond observation to bring participation back into online ethnography, in a novel and ethical way. Indeed, if a lurker role is adopted by a researcher, listening becomes even more ethically important, as it enables a researcher to engage with interactions on social media within their emotional, multi-media and community context.

Listening as a mode of ethnographic participation allows a researcher to take account of *how* people are speaking online, by incorporating all forms of media into analysis. This is crucial as it recognises that although social media interactions may *look* predominantly text based there are myriad ways that individuals express emotion within their conversations (Steinmetz, 2012), such as gifs, emoticons and memes. By ensuring that varied forms of interaction are included within data collection and analysis, listening enables a researcher to hear the feelings behind the words, thereby taking account of their affective contexts. Taking all conversational dimensions into account, hearing the inflections and emotions within these, goes beyond a textual 'observation' of text to offer an in-depth understanding of community development, communication, and behaviours (Varis, 2016) as the context *and* mode of expression become central to analysis. In theorising 'listening,' thus, as an act that goes beyond observation to signify an affective engagement with digital cultures, we argue it to be a situated and appropriate way to extend sensory ethnography (Pink, 2009) to online spaces. The practice of listening acknowledges the importance of holistic data collection, one which does not remove a social media post from its surrounding context. It allows us, as researchers, to actively engage with the multi-sensory nature of communication that occurs in online communities, thereby ensuring their ethical representation.

In this paper, we theorise two types of listening on social media: 'active' and 'adaptive'. Firstly, we present 'active listening,' which is the act of contextually engaging with the many voices that surround each social media post. Through this we demonstrate *why* listening is so key, both in terms of depth of analysis and for ethical practice. Second, the paper explores *how* to listen by proposing a mode of engagement that we term 'adaptive listening.' This is required to take account of the heterogeneity of online platforms as well as of the interactions that occur within them. By employing empirical findings from our research as a critical lens onto these modes of listening, this paper explores the act of 'listening' online, in all its ethical complexity.

The data on which the paper reflects are drawn from an online ethnography of interactions around self-harm. Responding to Marcus's call to "follow the thing" (Marcus, 1995) in ethnography, data were collected at two distinct time-points, once in May 2018 and once in January 2019, from *Instagram, Twitter* and *Reddit*. Hashtags relating to self-harm acted as pathways through the Internet, accessing conversations across these platforms. As with offline ethnography, data collection was therefore a cyclical process of continually tracking back and forth across the field site, as we searched for, entered, and assessed the generated terms and the spaces and discussions that these led us into. In total we gathered: 4845 posts on Instagram, 2253 on Twitter, and 3081 original posts on Reddit, additionally we reviewed a total of 36,934 comments and captions associated with these posts on each social media site. As is usual in ethnography, fieldwork diaries comprising written descriptions of online interactions were kept and visual and textual data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The study was funded by the Wellcome Trust and received ethical approval from the University of Birmingham. Given the sensitive nature of self-harm, the confidentiality of online participants is paramount; individuals turn to social media due the anonymity it provides (Dyson, et al., 2016), and this may be particularly valued in a time of mental health crisis (Tucker & Lavis, 2019). As such, although the paper draws on our ethnographic fieldnotes written during data collection, to ensure that participants remain unidentifiable, no direct quotes or hashtags are included.

Why Listen? Taking Account of Context through 'Active Listening'

This section outlines a mode of ethnographic engagement that we term 'active listening'. We conceptualise this as a sustained engagement with the *context* of online articulations. It involves tracing the layering and looping of words and images, as interactions emerge between different

forms of data, as well as between different interlocutors. Active listening, thus, is suggested to be a way to attend to the polyphonia of voices that make up online spaces, as social media posts often set in motion discussions that not only loop back to the original poster but also move beyond them into other topics and spaces.

One way in which active listening attends to context is by not only reading the words that caption an image, but also understanding the nuances of speech by engaging with diverse forms of expression, such as capitalisation, emojis, GIFs, memes and exchanging physical actions (such as a hug). A further way involves tracking the words or images that web outwards from a post, which entrench or disrupt frames of meaning.

Whilst ethnography has long been employed to investigate textual interactions online (Hine, 2000; Kozinets, 2002), its use on multi-media or primarily visual platforms such as *Instagram* clearly elucidates the need for 'active listening' that goes beyond only observation to hearing the voices. Although this may appear at first glance to be a contradictory statement, it is the complex interplay between the textual and the visual that observational ethnographic practice is yet to fully recognise. Explorations of visual online data have yet to gain traction in relation to topics about which textual interactions tend to dominate on social media, such as self-harm (Seko & Lewis, 2018). Yet, taking account of one form of interaction on social media to the neglect of others risks producing and replicating misconceptions.

Our research into self-harm related posts on *Instagram* offers a stark demonstration of the misconceptions that may arise if isolated observation of posts is adopted without actively listening to their context:

> Extract 1. Fieldnotes, May 2018, observing the initial posts: *Typing hashtags relating to cutting into Instagram produced self-harm images, including fresh self-harm cuts mainly on the lower, inside of the arm. These showed varying degrees of injury, from shallow scratches to deep cuts, old wounds to ones which were bleeding. There were also quotes transposed often on images, such as a black and white photograph of tree with someone curled underneath. Content included expressions of depressive feelings through poetic quotes or song lyrics.*

At first sight, these fieldnotes would seem to support the prevalent cultural imaginings of self-harm content on social media, which often comprises photographs of bodily wounds; these notes describe graphic imagery and might engender an easy assumption that this may encourage or

exacerbate the possibility of self-harming behaviours (Lewis, Heath, St Denis, & Noble, 2011). Indeed, a recent study observing self-harm images and hashtags on *Instagram* suggested that these are harmful to young people and should be more vigilantly monitored (Moreno, Ton, Selkie, & Evans, 2016). However, the predominant focus on hashtags and photographic content in that study meant that minimal attention was paid to explanations of the images.

Roland Barthes argued in his seminal work (1977) that photographs are "a message without a code" (p. 17) when viewed without explanatory text. Amongst the many voices and images of online spaces, one person's self-harm photograph can become unmoored from the emotional contexts that underpin and give meaning to the act. Placed in the public space of social media, such personal imagery risks being emptied of significance and, indeed, that which is signified (Barthes op cit.) and filled instead with researcher assumptions. Engaging, as a researcher, with a textual or visual post without taking account of the words or images that give it context and meaning could therefore be termed a 'partial listening'. That misconceptions of self-harm content on social media are drawn from this is ethically problematic and does a disservice to participants. Social media can offer a vital form of support and avenue for speaking about distress and receiving peer-to-peer care. Therefore, it is ethically imperative to observe what is being posted and the interactions surrounding these, whilst listening completely to how individuals are expressing care, pain, and emotions online.

Active listening enables a researcher to hold textual and visual data together in the same analytical space. By attending to the caption or explanation that accompanies a posted image, such as of a person's self-harm cuts, active listening allows the image to remain moored within an individual's intended frame of reference. It listens to their motivation for uploading the image, as well as its meaning, thereby reducing the ways in which the image might be interpreted. In our research, this has offered a portrait of self-half content on social media that differs from many existing discussions. Expanding the images, reading the descriptions and comments has instead revealed the pervasive theme of care and support as help-seeking and giving coalesce around images, even those that may appear simply to be 'graphic':

> Extract 2: Fieldnotes, May 2018, Reading the associated conversations: *Alongside the images were text captions about the poster's current feelings, which described how that individual felt at the time of posting. Alongside these were emoticons, such as a sad or crying face, to further emphasis the emotions they felt at the time of writing. The original posters wrote how self-harming was associated with failing, or losing control. Or they wrote*

that they had to cut themselves and when. Or, they provided further explanation behind their motivation to cut, such as talking about a specific relationship or event in their day, such as an argument with their partner, parents or friends.

Active listening, then, pays attention to context to build up a "thick description" (Geertz, 1973) of online self-harm imagery. In so doing, it reveals and counters misconceptions that observation alone may perpetuate, such as that this content simply 'glorifies' self-harm or that it is the same as suicide content. Despite a persistent equation in research and public imaginings of self-harm and suicide content on social media, actively listening to the complexity of their emotional contexts has shown there to be important differences between these, which require recognition.

A further way in which active listening attends to context is by engaging with the tangle of conversations that web outwards from a post. These do not only take the form of written words but also of emojis and images – both personal and memes. The crying face emoji, for instance, means that a poster need not write their emotion, instead they can represent the feelings behind the words through choosing an image that reflects how these should be read. Posting this is thus an affective articulation, one that directs the listening of interlocutors and lurkers.

A key part of following conversations is also by listening to how the original poster responds to comments. Importantly, this differs from only reading the associated comments. Here we therefore emphasise conversation as a looping as well as a webbing:

> Extract 3. Fieldnotes, May 2018, Listening to the conversation: *Scrolling through the conversations in the comment section, the overwhelming sentiment is of care, understanding and exchanges of experiences. "Here if you need to talk", "I care about you", "you are loved", "please get help" and "keep fighting". Commonly, a heart emoticon or smiling face were sent, representing the emotional tone of the message, and further reinforcing this as an act of care. Instead of encouraging further harm to the body or expressing approval of the wounds, the comment section was used to send supportive messages. These developed into conversations, with original posters writing replies such as "thank you so much, I really needed to hear that". Others wrote of how they once felt the same, for instance trying to reduce emotional pain through cutting, and how they managed to stop.*

In contrast to encouraging self-harm, our data again shows care and support being offered and appreciated by those within this conversation. An understanding of this care as core to self-harm

content on social media hinges on this recognition that comments are not isolated articulations but are instead part of a conversation, with emotional inflections.

Opposed to an ethnographic practice that may privilege textual observation, then, active listening engages with posts in their interactional and affective context. It echoes offline moves towards sensory ethnography, noted earlier, by emphasising the need for a multi-dimensional approach to online data, in which an utterance, whether visual or textual, is listened to from various viewpoints in context. This allows the development of a nuanced understanding of *how* and *what* people are conversing about in online spaces. It responds to the need to engage completely with posts, avoiding removing these from their embedded context and reinforces the ethical imperative of hearing the emotions behind participants' words. As such, active listening is advocated as key to online ethnography but its foregrounding of ethics also shows it to have a role to play in online research more widely.

How to Listen: 'Adaptive Listening' across Social Media

Having drawn on our research on online self-harm interactions to establish the need for a refocusing on listening and explicitly incorporating it into online ethnographic practice, this section reflects on *how* to listen.

Discussions of adaptive listening in offline research have primarily related to interview technique, in suggesting that a researcher adapt their interactions with interviewees through carefully listening to responses (Beatty, 2004). In turn, a conceptualisation of being adaptive in ethnography has emerged within discussions of multi-sited ethnography, which is "designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations" (Marcus, 1998, p. 90). The suggestion that "the essence of multi-sited research is to follow people, connections, associations, and relationships across space" (Falzon, 2016, p. 2) has clear relevance to online ethnography in which connections and relationships can be tracked across *digital* space. Building on this background, adaptive listening offers a way to embrace the multiplicity and heterogeneity of online communities to forge a nuanced understanding of different social media sites and their distinct cultures.

There are, to date, few studies exploring self-harm content on social media that compare different platforms. However, studies focusing on a single platform have illustrated the cultural differences between these, as well as shown how modes of analysis that privilege textual or visual content

afford differing interpretations. A visual narrative analysis of self-harm images and their associated comments on *Tumblr* found the content to be both that of hopelessness and pro-recovery (Seko & Lewis, 2018). In turn, Moreno et al.'s (2016) study of self-harm hashtags on *Instagram* concluded that the site should improve their Content Advisory resources, due to the triggering and distressing nature of images associated with the hashtags and lack of content warnings. Both of these studies engaged with visual imagery of self-harm but they came to alternative conclusions. This, alongside our own data which were drawn from three different platforms, demonstrate the need to conceptualise each platform, and the communities within them, as distinct cultural entities.

As noted above, comments alongside posts are not one-way exchanges only with other users responding to the post, but rather signify an unfurling of conversations between the original poster and many others. The topic of posts and subsequent conversations vary despite being collected through the same search terms or hashtags. Listening to discussions that coalesce around hashtags relating to cutting on *Twitter* illustrates this:

> Extract 4. Fieldnotes, May 2018, **Twitter:** *One person wrote of taking a blade and cutting themself, another of needing support as they were cutting at the time of writing. Expanding these tweets to read the associated comments highlights the anonymous support provided by others online. Individuals sent their prayers (both textually and using an emoji with closed hands), support, love and virtual hugs. They wrote that the poster could private message and chat if they needed it. There was an acknowledgement and appreciation of these comments though the original poster thanking them in return, sending back hearts or appreciate emojis.*
>
> *At the same time, this group of tweets included posts about managing not to cut themselves for a certain amount of time. These posts received highly supportive responses with complimentary comments such as "you're so strong" and clapping or heart emojis. A conversation then ensued with individuals exchanging their own length of time not having cut. The original poster then congratulated them, and so conversations developed and continue.*

With these examples from *Twitter* we see how the same hashtag is used to both discuss someone cutting themselves and another managing to not cut for a certain length of time. This demonstrates the diversity surrounding the same hashtags. However, it also represents similarities, in that care is provided in response to both of these and this is conveyed through the same modes

of expression, as discussed in the previous section. The second example above also generated a space for success stories to be shared.

Thus, online platforms and spaces are heterogeneous (Rosenberg, 2010) and the diversity *within* social media platforms as well as *between* them requires an approach that conjoins active listening with the flexibility found in multi-sited ethnography. If active listening emphasised the multi-dimensionality of context, adaptive listening takes this a step further to also recognise its multiplicity.

Moreover, comparing two different subreddits on *Reddit*, both related to self-harm, shows further multiplicity by illustrating the varying ways in which people communicate on the same social media platform but in different communities. The first appeared to comprise an older population, writing about their experiences, typically in prose. The second was a younger community who used the space to share memes, had developed their own humour and less frequently discussed their present experiences.

> Extract 5. Fieldnotes, May 2018, **Reddit:** *The first subreddit appeared to have an older population, with longer text about their current experiences. For instance, some wrote about the urge to cut themselves that they have been actively trying to but cannot and stop before they make a wound. The responses, far from providing suggestions of how to cut, encourage them to reflect on why they feel they want to self-harm and work on those emotions, and explain why they should not start cutting. Importantly, they actively engage with the original poster through asking them questions, such as "how are you feeling now?"*
>
> *Another one, also surrounding self-harm, had a different community communication style. Within this one memes were used to interact. Additionally the community members appeared to know each other more evidenced through their referencing others. For instance, modulators or writing that someone was going into a psychiatric ward and they should tag them in comments so that they could see messages when they left. People showed their cutting stories on an outline of a body, where they draw their self-harm marks. This formulated discussions through others asking questions about the images, joking about their own experiences, or discussing "normals" (people who do not self-harm).*

These differences within *Reddit* elucidate the microcosms of cultures nested within larger discourses and spaces. Each platform signifies the coming together of demographically diverse communities of users and modes of articulation. Every digital community, then, even within a

single platform, communicates in a distinct way that is entwined with the identity of the community and its members (Nocera, 2002). This shows that all communication styles have cultural and social meaning (Andalibi, Ozturk, & Forte, 2017) and memes, images, videos, and text may be used as an important form of expression.

On *Instagram* individuals use pictures, images and videos to express themselves, whereas *Reddit* involves written prose and *Twitter* uses condensed posts. Adaptive listening that moves between *Instagram, Twitter* and *Reddit,* for example, as well as within each of these, requires a researcher to also move between diverging modes of analysis; data in various forms - long written prose, images, gifs, emojis, memes and short posts - require a shifting of attention from hearing to reading to observing in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the online interactions occurring across and within social media platforms.

It has previously been suggested that a particular strength of online ethnography is the flexibility it permits; techniques can be adapted to the research topic, space and community under study (Hine, 2000; Kozinets, 2002). Against this background, 'adaptive listening' signifies, like that of 'active listening', a return to a core tenet of ethnographic practice and both are essential to ethical online ethnography. Once more this demonstrates how listening offers an ethical mode of engagement with the diverse tangle of interactions within and between social media communities, ensuring they are treated as their own cultural entities with unique forms of communication.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to contribute to discussions of social media research ethics by calling for a return to 'listening' as central to the practice of online ethnography and digital research more widely. Whilst online ethnography has often been synonymous with observation, we have argued that this offers only partial understandings of social media. This is ethically problematic as it risks losing the nuances that exist in online spaces, and potentially does a disservice to participants and the communities to which they belong.

We have, instead, theorised 'listening' as a multisensory act that complements observation by offering a way for researchers to *participate in*, as well as observe, online spaces. It allows us to engage with the polyphonia of voices, memes, emoticons and other imagery that make up digital culture. Listening is therefore key to an ethical analytical engagement with this complexity.

Ethical research practice, we have argued, needs a methodological approach that goes beyond engaging with social media posts in isolation, to take account of interactional and affective

contexts. To this end we have put forward 'active listening,' which is the sustained engagement with the words and images that surround and give meaning to each post, including the captions, comments, and loops and webs of conversations that ensue. Such an attention to context offered by active listening enables a researcher to gain a holistic understanding of digital culture.

In turn, drawing listening back to the centre of ethnographic practice recognises and reflects on online platforms as heterogeneous, and demonstrates the imperative to represent them as such. To facilitate an ethical analytic engagement with this diversity between and within online communities, we have proposed 'adaptive listening'. This allows the representation of digital cultures as their own distinct cultural entities and acknowledges that the varied ways of expression in each require researchers to be flexible in our ways of listening.

The importance of these two modes of attention, and a reprioritising of listening overall, is clear when exploring a single phenomenon such as self-harm. Active and adaptive listening challenge misconceptions that observation alone may perpetuate, such as that self-harm content 'glorifies' self-harm or that it is synonymous with suicide content. It is only through listening that nuances and distinctions can be drawn, and the emotions behind textual interactions can be engaged with. As such, both of these modes of listening are key to the ethical representation of online participants and their affective as well as digital worlds. Furthermore, the ethical imperative to listen actively and adaptively is drawn to the fore when a researcher adopts a role online that mirrors that of a 'lurker.' Listening-*as*-participation permits but also necessitates that a researcher engage with all multi-media utterances that exist within conversations, and thus the emotional contexts to the written words.

Drawing on our data to theorise the practices and ethics of listening has thereby offered a poignant reminder that online spaces are places where people *voice* their, sometimes extremely painful and personal, experiences. What ensues are *conversations* that deserve to be listened to in their entirety.

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