Critique of podcasting as an anthropological method

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Abstract

Digital audio technologies have expanded the methodological possibilities for anthropological research. This article explores some of the implications of using podcasting as an anthropological method, specifically an experiment in which interlocutor interviews were regularly published as part of an exploration into digital politics in India. The article uses the reflexive insights garnered from making the series to interrogate the possibilities of interlocutor interview podcasting for anthropology. Further to this, it exploits the interlocutors' expertise on digital practices to reverse the analytical gaze, asking what their experiences of the digitalising Indian public sphere can teach us about changing academic/anthropological practices, especially regarding the enabling (or not) of new ways of speaking, vocal performances, the possibility for immediate publishing, and celebrations of newness. Building from these critical appraisals, it is suggested that the latent promise of interlocutor interview podcasting lies in the potential to create 'aural intimacy' and a 'circulating copresence'.

The digital is pregnant with promise. Promises of structure-breaking, agency-granting, newness-creating wonder; and promises of dehumanisation-inducing, addiction-forming, discourse-destroying horror. As a future-heavy cultural phenomenon, digitalisation works its way into diverse realms which, whilst never

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being completely defined by its expectations, nevertheless produces resemblances that, when brought into sustained dialogue with one another, can lead to novel understandings within and across otherwise discrete practices. In this vein, this article critiques interlocuter interview podcasting as an anthropological method. It does so through an analysis of both the content of podcast interviews (with Indian digital media users) and the practice of making the podcasts.

From August 2017 until June 2019 I ran the podcast series 'Online Gods – Digital Cultures in India and Beyond' together with media anthropologist Sahana Udupa. The broad aim of the series was to explore how digitalisation is changing public spheres in India in a way that was both accessible but academically rigorous (Cook, 2019). It was part of a wider project on 'digital dignity' and had 16 episodes in total. Each episode, first one or both of us spoke to a scholar about a key concept or topic they have worked with or on, and, secondly, I talked with an 'online god', a playful name we used to designate someone who is using new media in an interesting or innovative fashion in relation to politics, religion or national belonging. Concurrent to this, along with researcher and audio practitioner Dumitriṭa Holdis, I have conducted research into 'academic podcasting'. Drawing on both these projects, though primarily the first, I offer a critical appraisal of podcasting as a digitalisation-engendered research method. Specifically I critique the interlocuter-interview podcast method, i.e. the second part of our podcast in which we spoke with 'online gods'.

These individuals are highly skilled in utilising new media. Accordingly, I want to use the 'online gods'' insights to reflect on anthropological podcasting (without directly comparing them to academic podcasters). Though some may object to using interlocutor's analyses from one realm and applying them to another, this is, of course, what we do with our fellow scholars' analyses. On questions of digital practice, I value my interlocutors' thoughts as highly as my colleagues'. However, I also recognise that academic training and enculturation leads to broadly shared epistemological logics and forms of expression, which might make some scholars uncomfortable with the use of 'unscholarly' forms of analysis. Against this, I would argue that in using the digital to research the digital, there is a unique opportunity to critique our own methodologies. In short, who better to ask about our emerging digital practices than online gods?

Though podcasting is a digitally-enabled practice, I am not concerned with digitisation (the turning of something into digital bytes), but rather with the process of digitalisation – i.e. the cultural implications of digitisation, including who is enabled by the process to enter specific realms and with what possibilities (Gürsel, 2016). As such, the aim of this article is to both delineate the possibilities of podcasting as a research method and to see how, in doing so, we might generate new, possibly surprising, ideas. In this sense it is an 'anthropology in the meantime': an "ethnography of how the pieces of the world interact, fit together or clash, generating complex unforeseen consequences, reinforcing cultural resonances, and causing social ruptures" (Fischer, 2018: 3) and draws inspiration from the notion that "fieldwork can be seen as an experiment in real time, where insights

gained intersubjectively gradually shape up as knowledge through analysis"
(Hastrup, 2018: 316). Whilst not fieldwork in a traditional sense (but what is
these days?), the podcasting experiment was nevertheless one in which I opened
my unfinished and uncertain insights to a listening public.

The potential links to anthropological film, emerging ethical concerns, different
types of podcasts (e.g. documentaries, essays or discussions) and the specific pos-
sibilities for different fields of anthropology (e.g. the anthropology of performance,
or linguistic anthropology) fall out of the scope of this article, though would
provide interesting future avenues of research and reflection. The ways different
prominent anthropologists' create scholarly authority through vocal performances
– with podcasts, at conferences, in the classroom or lecture hall – would also be
fascinating; a 'speaking culture' to follow on from last century's 'writing culture'
debates. However, this would also be a different study.

I want to make it clear from the outset that my interest in interrogating pod-
casting is not to celebrate it, but rather critique it so it can develop as a possible
method. Like all methodologies, podcasting is only appropriate for certain topics
with certain groups of people, has inbuilt limitations and could be used produc-
tively or not alongside other approaches. By reading this article, nobody will be
forced to make a podcast! In what follows, I want to dig deeper into how 'inter-
locuter interview podcasting' as a method can be used in research, specifically in
relation to voice and time, using the online gods' analyses to explore the potential
of 'aural intimacy' and 'circulating copresence'. Beforehand, in the next section, I
will explicate the promise of podcasting along these lines, before detailing the
practical considerations of making such a podcast experiment.

The promise of podcasting

Nearly three decades ago, Hastrup and Hervik (1994) wrote,

> A central methodological problem facing anthropology today is how to deal with the
> flow of intersubjective human experience without dehumanizing it, that is without
> deconstructing it as *experience* and transforming it into totalizing professional models
> of knowledge (p. 6 emphasis in original)

To a large extent this problem persists, but the digitalisation of methodologies
has allowed for new possible avenues to tackle this issue to emerge. Different
disciplines have welcomed podcasting in different ways. Political scientists have
argued that podcasting allows them to embrace their role as public intellectuals by
using the discipline's theoretical and empirical knowledge to interpret political
developments (Barker et al., 2020); urbanists have explored how to collaboratively
and sonically respond to urban change across different national contexts (Rogers
et al., 2020); while sociologists have proposed 'podcast ethnography' as a method
to explore, examine and engage with podcast series produced by those they
research (Lundström and Lundström, 2020).

Departing from this, and with anthropological concerns placed centrally, I critically assess the efficacy of creating interlocuter interview podcasts within anthropology. Other podcasting possibilities for anthropologists might include, for example, audio documentary style work, immersive soundscapes or interlocuter co-produced series, which will hopefully be explored elsewhere. Podcasting is, in its strict technical definition, simply on-demand online audio, with the 'on demand online' nature of podcasting shifting the temporal and spatial contours of the medium allowing for extremely niche podcasts of any length to be narrowcasted to an audience no matter how small, i.e. before podcasting, a 50-minute long India-focused media anthropology podcast would struggle to find a slot on a radio station. However, the potential for anthropological podcasting goes beyond an ability to find an audience. I argue that the main promise contained within the interlocuter-interview podcast is quite a simple yet powerful one: we hear can the human voices of interlocuters in dialogue with and alongside those of anthropologists. It is the vocal and temporal potentialities of this that I seek to critique.

The potential benefits of hearing the voice of those we research amongst is not primarily a question of representation or dissemination, but, akin to other possibilities put forth by multimodal anthropology, interlocuter interview podcasts can rather contribute to a "*politics of invention* for the discipline... [offering] a line of flight for an anthropology yet to come: multisensorial rather than text based, performative rather than representational, and inventive rather than descriptive. (Dattatreyan and Marrero-Guillamón, 2019: 222)". The sensorial, performative and inventive possibilities offered by digital multimodality allows the form to be guided by the research material (Varzi, 2018) in a way that can retain the messiness of ethnographic entanglements, allowing for the "knotting and twisting of different modes of knowledge generation" (Nolas and Varvantakis, 2018: 1). In the case of 'online gods', this is the possibility to hear the actual voices of interlocutors as part of conversations within a regularly produced podcast series that also features professional anthropologists and media scholars.

Putting the voices front and centre gives these voices' value, thus potentially destabilising the horizontal relationships between researcher, interlocutor and listeners (Horst and Miller, 2012). Further to this, hearing these voices alongside different anthropologists' voices might also be a way of highlighting the differences that exist between 'us anthropologists', in a way that hopefully challenges the implicit and often invisible white western sense of anthropological 'we' in most texts, thus hopefully further questioning the quasi-heroic anthropological 'I' as the producer of legible knowledge from amidst exotic alterity (Chua and Mathur, 2018). I have a gradually waning small-town northern English accent (Glossopian), meanwhile between the co-host, professional scholars and online god interlocuters we had a mix of accents which will have been coded in different ways depending upon listeners' familiarity with Indian English and academic English, among others.

The different backgrounds of the speakers that listeners imagine are based, except in the case of the more famous guests, on only the sound of our voices

and, as such, personality along with assumed ethnicity, age, caste, gender, sexual orientation etc. are created through the voices in the listeners' heads. Podcasting's acousmatic character (sound that can be heard, whilst the source remains unseen) allows for a 'reduced listening' that concentrates the listener upon the sound object (Chion, 2012; Schaeffer, [1966] 2004), leaving listeners to fill in the source and cause for themselves, thus engendering the imaginative projection of a 'sonic body' (Kane, 2014). This sonic body is performed as we seek, with varying degrees of self-awareness, to project a certain idea of the self when we speak through the podcast. The anthropologist may wish to perform scholarly authority, and may be more or less skilled at doing so, similar to how she might be more or less skilled at constructing an authoritative ethnographic text.

One of the affordances offered by audio, however, is an ability to play with intimacy and emotion in a different way than one can with text as the modern human voice is often perceived as an agency laden producer of emotional connections between people (Bauman and Briggs, 2003). Here lies the first potential of podcasting for anthropology, that it can allow for the creation of 'aural intimacy' between listener, anthropologist and guest. Changes in access to audio technologies, such as the spread of radio, engenders intimacy, something brought forth, in part, through informal communication styles, the sensory qualities of audio broadcasts, sharing of private thoughts and unscripted interactions (Kunreuther, 2014). If anything, podcasting allows for the extension of these possibilities, with podcast scholars arguing that certain topics lend themselves to podcasting because the medium is well suited for play, emotion and intimacy (Spinelli and Dann, 2019).

Such potentials are furthered through ear-bud listening practices (the norm for podcast listening) as it enables the creation of a 'privatized soundworld', an experience of the world as "intimate, known, and possessed" (Bull, 2013: 534), with this 'interior' listening mode conceptually different from hearing voices on a radio speaker (Spinelli and Dann, 2019). Indeed, podcasting can be understood as an 'intimate bridging medium': a means of communication that generates closeness between listener and podcast guests and producers, despite the lack of physical proximity (Swiatek, 2018), something which is furthered by the active choice on the part of the listener to stream, download or subscribe, a choice that helps creates a 'sonorous intimacy' (Llinares et al., 2018: 2) between those speaking and listening.

The active choice on the part of the listener to select the podcast from within the wider flow of digital media can be understood within the 'otherness' that characterises our experience when we inhabit digital media (Duclos, 2017). This otherness is not a type of media overload that produces a defensive dumbness in its receivers (e.g. McLuhan, 2001), but rather an inhabitation premised on negotiation and interaction with fast moving difference that, accordingly, requires purposeful choices on the side of the users. As such, being buffeted by digital speed, and making decisions on how to move within in fast moving currents, is to engage in co-constitutions of new temporalities amidst encounters with intense foreignness; an exposure to and immersion in otherness via an uncovered self that is "radically open to and opened by the world" (Duclos, 2017: 24). Accordingly,

when users discover a media anthropology podcast alongside memes, cat photos, porn and political debate, it is within a wider sea of fast-moving otherness.

This allows for a recasting of old anthropological questions relating to how we 'other' our interlocutors when we represent them in text or other mediums. This is the second possibility of podcasting for anthropology, that it allows for a 'circulating copresence' of anthropologist and interlocuter within digital media flows. It has famously been argued that anthropologists, through representations of the 'other', typically deny coevalness between those we study and ourselves (Fabian, 1983). One of the issues with representations is "not as a difference between reality and its images but as a tension between *re-presentation and presence*" (Fabian, 1990: 755 my emphasis). This temporal problem – how to address the strain between the copresence of inquiry and the lack of co-presence in representation – can potentially be addressed through interlocutor podcasting if practiced as an inventive multimodal methodology that is performative rather than representational, as it allows for a certain degree of co-presence within the otherness of digital media.

We do not share a common digital time (or space), as such techno-imaginary universalisms create temporal otherings of those people not (yet) developed enough to enter 'the digital' (Ginsburg, 2008). Rather there is a possibility to acknowledge coevalness between me as an anthropologist and the interlocutors who come on the podcast, through our copresence within a particular episode's circulation (these podcasts do not attempt to represent interlocutor's culture, but rather enable performances to emerge from it). Whereas, in the first instance, the podcast is one more piece of digital media amidst otherness (Duclos, 2017), once a listener subscribes, they receive the podcast directly to their smartphone or other listening device – i.e. the podcast is automatically downloaded without the need to experience digital media more broadly. We all might appear strange at first, especially amidst the noise of celebratory newness and the intense immediacy of digital production, but when listeners subscribe, they are choosing to share (linear) time together with us as we momentarily coinhabit media circulations.

'Aural intimacy' and 'circulating 'co-presence' will be critiqued below through discussions on voice and time respectively, however it should also be made clear that there is nothing unquestionably 'better' about the promise of new possibilities for intimacy nor in the temporal closeness induced through interlocuter-interview podcasting. One of the insights that emerged from anthropology's 'writing culture' debates is that a plurality of voices is not necessarily empowering, nor is writing about a culture inherently dehumanising, but rather that we should question how (and why) texts are created and to what affect. With the emergence of anthropological podcasting, questions of power, craft, style and authority remain, but are reframed through vocal performances, audio editing, the writing of scripts and even the modes of publishing within a digital media landscape. Further to this, podcasting may uphold anglophone native speaker biases, and side-line anthropologists whose skills lie in other areas. Some anthropologists may not have the background or disposition to create intimacy, play with emotion through audio

nor a desire to engage in circulations of digital media. This does not invalidate the podcasting method, but rather caution us to proceed critically, whilst being aware of the openings created by this digital methodology. Podcasting has brought forth audio practices that challenge conventions and traditional boundaries to mediation (Llinares, 2018), and the same is true for anthropological podcasting and academic podcasting more broadly. Indeed, for many podcasters, myself included, part of podcasting's promise is that there are no set rules; it offers a creative freedom akin to other 'new' mediums that, predictably, irritate conservative gatekeepers of accepted forms of media production (Llinares et al., 2018).

How to speak to an 'online god': Practical considerations

How does one practically go about creating an interlocuter interview podcast? It starts with the selection of the guest. Most months, we discussed who might be an interesting interlocuter. We made the selection based on topics that we thought showed innovation or influence within the broad realm of new media in India. I then contacted guests via social media or email and explained the podcast, spending considerable time researching their digital outputs before we spoke. For the interview I called them via VOIP software (Zencastr, Skype, Facebook) and recorded the conversation into both a digital recorder and computer software as a back-up. The interviews usually lasted around 40-60 minutes, but sometimes went on longer if I thought the interview took time to warm up. Recording conditions were a constant struggle, with guests often failing to heed my requests for quiet places or to create independent local recording. Before we started, I spent some time getting to know the guest, attempting to put them at ease, explaining how, as we are not live, it is fine to stop and answer a question again if they are unhappy. I also told them that because not all listeners are familiar with the Indian context, they should try to keep this mind. After the recoding, we then chatted a little bit more and I thanked them for their time. Sometimes they started saying something relevant for the podcast and so I asked them if I could turn on the recorder and potentially use what they say.

I went into the interview with three broad questions, which linked up with the broader question we explored in the podcast – what are the implications of the digitalisation of the public sphere in India in regards to religion, politics and belonging. The broadness of the question reveals the one of the limitations of the exercise as a piece of research. A 'standard' research question would be more tightly focussed but, and here some of the convergences with other digital media productions make themselves clear, we kept the interest of the listening public in mind when selecting topics and guests. As such I spoke with 'online gods' about a wide array of topics - atheism, surveillance, LGBTQI media, political comics, #metoo India, 'logical' news, Instagram city accounts, digital privacy, comedy, content creation, e-petitions, love and sex, right wing twittering, Dalit media, and women's e-magazines.

After the recording, the interview was edited down to around 20-25 minutes. The editing was done using Adobe Audition, or occasionally Audacity. Aside from noise reduction (to reduce hiss or other unwanted constant noises), volume equalisation and sometimes other effects such as compression, most of the editing involved cutting. In practice, this meant listening to the entire interview and then deciding if there is a question or answer that could be cut completely. This may be because the answer was not particularly interesting or relevant for the podcast (which could be a result of a poor question from my side). I also cut out some of the unwanted noises, such as coughing and if there were multiple awkward soundings 'ers' or 'ums'. This latter cutting was done to make the interview more pleasurable to listen to, but also had the effect of making the guest sound more eloquent or articulate, which I consider to be only fair considering the strangeness of being a podcast guest. I also further cut down parts of answers to questions if I thought they were not needed to make the point the guest is making. Once this was done, I recorded an introduction to the guest, highlighting anything upfront I think the listener might need to know, and then recorded a short reflection on the interview which came at the end, making note of interesting aspects, links to previous episodes or, occasionally, relevant work. I then sent the file to Sahana and she listened and usually came back with further suggestions of where to cut. I then sent the interview to the 'online god' if they ask to listen prior to publishing.

We published on a podcast hosting site (Libsyn) that creates an RSS feed to which people can subscribe. The site also sends the feeds into libraries such as iTunes, Stitcher and Spotfiy, all of which we had to apply to be a part of when we began the podcast. The interview is embedded on the project website, where all the episodes are listed. After publishing the podcast, I promoted it on social media (Facebook, twitter, Academia.edu) and through relevant email lists. After subscriptions to the RSS feed, email lists were by far the biggest driver of traffic to the podcast, except if a popular 'online god' posted about the podcast. We also sought to make agreements with established academic entities to help promote the content. At the first we partnered with HAU Network for Ethnography Theory, but terminated the agreement after we became aware of allegations of unethical behaviour. We are now an official podcast partner of the American Anthropological Association, whilst the online initiative of the Indian journal Economic and Political Weekly (EPW Engage) republished all the episodes. Part of the listening and production logic of podcasting is the regular releasing of new content. Though most of the downloads occurred within the first days of release (and subsequent promotion), all the past podcasts remain online and continue to be listened to. As Swati, a volunteer with the Indian Atheists argues in relation to their output

> . . .you are building this body of work, this huge repository of resources that people can access at any point in time. And they can check back, and they read about it. . . not just your content, but you know the things that people say in response to your content.

As Swati further points out, being in networks of digital circulation results in interactions with a public, which also form part of the output's impact. Usually this was nothing more than liking tweets or thanking people if they wrote complimentary things, but sometimes it resulted in a more involved exchange. For example, one listener questioned the use of the term 'Dalit media', after which we had an email exchange, which I then read out on the next podcast. On another occasion, media scholar Usha Raman's class on Digital Culture at the University of Hyderabad were tasked with writing blog posts about the podcasts, one of which I then read an excerpt from on the next episode.[1] Occasionally people also complained about the podcast guests if they did not share their political opinions or I did not challenge their views strongly enough. Most noticeably, liberal-identifying academics were unhappy that I spoke with Rishi Bagree, a right-wing twitter commentator without putting a disclaimer that I did not share his political opinions. This, I believe, reflects the in-between nature of the type of interview – it is neither wholly an 'anthropological interview' or a journalistic interview (accounting for the wide variety of styles and approaches within the two). I approached the interview, as I approached all the interviews for the podcast, with the aim of putting questions to the guest in a way that will allow the listeners to understand their world view. Opposed to this, some anthropologists argued that certain world views should not be given a platform or come with a disclaimer.

Usually most interviews begin with me trying to have the 'online god' frame their intentional actions in the public sphere in their own words and asking follow-up questions if needed. We then discuss the specifics of the type of new media they work with, before moving on to the political or social implications of their activities. Finally, I end the conversation by asking them about how they might understand 'digital dignity', a concept that comes out of the wider project, and which we ask both the scholars and 'online gods' we interview to reflect on as an ongoing co-creative exercise. Aside from this final question, there is not a fixed formula for the interviews and, as with any semi-structured interview, questions are also developed on the spot.

Having covered the practical considerations of creating an interlocuter-interview podcast, I now want to turn to the data gleaned through the digital ethnography with the online gods. The ethnographic data has been analysed and selected here with the purpose of uncovering what the online gods' thoughts and practices might teach us about podcasting as an anthropological method (rather than, say, the digitalisation of the public sphere in India). The material has been organised around issues pertaining to voice and time.

Listening to the voices in your head: Comedy, politics and sex

Kuffir Nalgundwar, one of the co-founders of *Round Table India*, a site that publishes stories by and about Dalit-Bahujans, does not look like the obvious face of 'digital India'. Not only was he 54 years old when I spoke with him through

Facebook messenger, but a cigarette was never far from his lips, he had dishevelled hair and exuded an energetic anger that would fit well at a packed political rally. However, as he reflected in episode 3, part of the promise of digital media is precisely this: a plurality of voices and no gatekeepers. As he argues regarding mainstream media,

> [we feel we] are not allowed to speak our own voices, anywhere, [as] we don't have a platform. We don't have a platform because we lack capital . . . we are dispersed . . . As outsiders some may like to write in the mainstream media, but it's not possible.

He was also aware of the structural limitations that digitalisation has inherited, bemoaning the lack of resources that would be needed for growth, whilst distrusting both "capital and the state" as potential sources of funding. There is nothing inherently democratising about the increasing number of voices in the India public sphere (nor the academic sphere) without considering how structures promote and silence these voices. Indeed, voice- or language- based hierarchies are present both within academic communities and the communities with which we research. Cultural formations render certain forms of communication legible or illegible and give some voices agency whilst removing it from others and, as such, these 'ideologies of voice' embed power or constraints within spoken or written utterances (Weidman, 2014). Such aspects are well understood by the podcast interlocutors who reflect on how class, caste and the post-colonial relationship with English shape online interactions, and, also, how language is lagging-behind emerging desires to express oneself online.

These questions were at the forefront of my mind when, two episodes later, I interviewed Paromita Vohra, the Creative Director of *Agents of Ishq*, a site about love and sex. The site produces different media (text, video, podcast) and invites user contributions. She argued that "there isn't really a contemporary language of sex that is Indian" as many of the words used come from American popular culture. Accordingly, with the site she wanted to co-create a "language world. . . [i.e.] a way of talking" for present day India. What Paromita found was that people started using an assortment of different Indian languages that freely mixed romantic tender phrases with very sexualised terms. Whilst certain sites or online communities can engender inclusion through language adaption, ideologies of voice can also help cement exclusion. The above mentioned Kuffir Nalgundwar from *Round Table India* spoke of how this plays out through caste hierarchies:

> [on twitter] where in you know a majority or 95 percent are Brahmins, Suvarna, upper caste, they already have a certain kind of knowledge capital and they . . .[are] already are connected in some ways [. . ..] telepathically to each other's' thoughts. . .[they can] finish of each other's sentences. . . Those people do not need to know each other, they speak the same language, the same types of waves and frequencies. . . myself I am 54 now, and I was new to social media. I stuck to twitter because there were no Dalits except for me and a couple of others. . . [but] it dehumanises you and brutalises you.

As such, whilst digitalisation calls for, and calls forth, changes in language use, pre-existing formations continue to structure online communications with digital-isation re-inscribing power relations, rather than being inherently democratizing.[2]

Similarly, language use is also being challenged, as the digitalisation of academic knowledge production creates the possibilities for new modalities of expression across different media, including podcasts. There is a tacit understanding of what is an accepted academic voice when it comes to writing, with most anthropology texts, especially when published in journals, falling within a certain range of acceptability. This is a voice which we learn as students, and continue to learn as scholars when colleagues, co-authors and editors suggest expression changes (as one reviewer did to this article). Making academic podcasts, for me, has been a welcome unlearning of this academese (though it seems impossible to avoid it in journal articles). I have argued elsewhere that podcasting can make academia doubly open, open because it allows for ideas often closed behind paywalls avail-able, but also open because the ideas expressed by scholars in conversation can be more readily accessible than when they write them (Cook, 2018b). Similarly, a considerable amount of the positive feedback received about the podcast segment where we interview an academic has related to the expression of scholarly issues in a more 'everyday language'.

Voice is about more than language use, of course, with podcasting also allowing listeners to hear the sonic qualities of interlocutors' utterances, something that came out most clearly when speaking to a rapper (episode 6) and comedian (epi-sode 7), both of whom are used to performing different selves through digital media. Activist rapper and content creator Sofia Ashraf plays on voice in her comedic videos by switching between a 'more Indian' sounding voice and more 'correct' sounding 'English' accent when playing different characters. She rose to fame as a political rapper, creating pieces about western multinationals' failure to address the consequences of pollution and industrial disasters, and has since cre-ated satirical music and other videos about topics including periods, pregnancy and hijabs. After spending time with her lively characters online during pre-interview research, I was surprised when, after calling her, she seemed quiet and unresponsive. I remember thinking to myself, 'this is going to be a terrible inter-view', but as soon as I pressed record, she sprang to life and delivered an interview full of verve, before returning to a subdued version of herself once I pressed stop. The comedian Atul Khatri, meanwhile, seems to play an over-the-top extension of his everyday personality when on stage. Finding his voice in Indian comedy later than most, he had a mid-life career change after years of amusing his friends online. When I spoke to him, he argued that comedians were being pushed into making fun of politicians because other groups were not holding them to account. Like accent switching, he and many other comedians also switch between English and Hindi, with the set up generally in English the punchline in Hindi something he explains through attributing more diverse meanings to Hindi words and think-ing in 'Hinglish'. Such verbal performances (which include mundane or podcast conversations) are constituted through combinations of volume, pitch, timbre,

intonation and phonetic variances of the human voice (Eisenlohr, 2007). These techniques create and uphold typified voices and are entwined with social, moral and cultural positions, people and groups.

I was aware of my only vocal techniques when, for the first episode of the podcast I spoke with Nisha Susan from the online women's magazine *The Ladies Finger*. We had to stop and restart the recording because Nisha started laughing at my own performance when I switched from 'pre-interview talking voice' to a bubblier, more carefully annunciating and tonally diverse 'podcast voice'. At the time I did this unconsciously, though now I am aware I had affected a 'direct' radio voice, achieved through liveliness and use of the phatic function ('do you know what I mean?') (Kunreuther, 2010). Liveliness and directness might also be said to categorise the publishing of digital media like podcasts, and it is to the temporal considerations of digital publishing that we now turn.

Stillness amidst newness: Cartoons, #metoo and logical Indians

Newness and change run deep through discourses about how digitally enabled Indians are wringing changes in different contexts. However, much of the celebration of 'digital India', especially from the state and liberal commentators, fetishizes technology, ignores the messy politics of everyday life and elides the heterogeneity of actors and contexts (Udupa et al., 2020). Online work does not simply destructure pre-existing power relations of class, gender, caste, religion and region, but rather such relations are re-inscribed through digital networks (*ibid*). Likewise, the spread of internet communication technologies in an academic setting has, despite techno-utopian claims about the neutrality and efficiency of digitalisation, augmented pre-existing tendencies towards a devaluation of meaningful academic practice. Digital technologies have made the measuring, auditing and comparing of academic output increasingly easier (Woodcock, 2018), allowing an academic to be measured against her peers (Hall, 2013), with such measurement not only recording but also setting standards (Beer, 2016) thus promoting marketized production over learning and wisdom in a way that ultimately de-values the latter (Fernback, 2018). Podcasting could, easily, become subsumed within such matrices of measurement, a proof of productivity that might miss the quantified prestige of a peer reviewed journal, but has the bonus of 'public engagement', technological innovation and immediacy.

It is not only the dislike of neoliberal academia that might give us pause for thought when assembling our digital research methodologies, but also the possibility of getting subsumed within the fast-moving flow of digital publishing. The cartoonist Appupen, whom I spoke with for episode 13, is aware of these concerns. He has made a number of political cartoons, including '*The Dystopian Times*' (mocking the *Times of India*, amongst others) and *Rashtraman* (about an ultra-nationalist super-hero). For him, crafting political or societal critiques requires the

forging of a temporality different from the daily (or even hourly) news cycles. He told me,

> Nowadays there are trends and the trends are kind of manufactured. Newspaper cartoonists, because they go every day at it, they sometimes get caught in these trends and forget the largest trends completely... it gets you in a sort of wheel, and you won't realise it... [I] try to remove myself from what I'm hearing once in a while and create an image that may make sense without the context of that particular day's news also.

Such continuous immediate publishing runs the risk of not only becoming entrapped in ever tightening circles of production with little time to think, but also with the production of simplified messages. When discussing the role of digitalisation-enabled acceleration and how it effects the content of his and other artist's work, Appupen almost sounded like an academic discussing their outputs. He told me,

> People now want instant realisation. They don't want to be in doubt. They don't want to be disturbed, they'll swipe to the next image. So, we're not allowed to use that element of disturbance. We should disturb the comfort bubble that the reader is in. We can disturb it through humour and art... [but now] discourse has become narrow, [you have to make sure you] connect. That's why the line that comes with the image is so important, because you need to make sure the person gets it.

This chimes with disappointing academic practices, such as anthropologists skipping over the 'more ethnographic sections' of journal articles as they are rushed by multiple, cross cutting deadlines in different spheres of their lives and thus do not have the time to spend more than a few minutes with a text, from which they want to 'get' the main idea and move on.[3]

However, despite the concerns around the increased speed afforded by digitalisation, many of the online gods I spoke with also emphasised the political potential of immediacy. One of the few interviews I was able to conduct in person was with Waseem Shan, the admin of Mangalore Meri Jaan (Mangalore My Life). Mangalore (officially renamed to Mangaluru) is a smaller city beset by frequent bouts of political religious violence (Cook 2018a; 2019). As I sat with him by the banks of the Gurupura River, he explained how he runs a relentlessly positive Instagram account about 'local culture', which refuses to engage in politics or trolling (unlike other city-based accounts). When tensions flare up in the city, it is always interesting to note the way his page intensifies its memes about shared cultural heritage, for instance about a locally celebrated ice-cream parlour or local beauty spots.

Such an immediacy is further celebrated by Mahima Kukeraj, a writer and comic who kick-started the second wave of #meetoo India. I spoke with her in episode 12, a few weeks after she was catapulted to digital 'fame' for accusing

another comic of sexual harassment (leading other women to do the same). We did not speak about her story of harassment, but rather the role digital media played. She told me,

> Social media is where it's at. We do something within like 2 seconds... there is no other channel right now, medium right now, which which sort of gives us that audience and that convenience and that effectiveness, really to bring out a storey or to tell the truth or even to take names even to like @ at someone... saying they did it to me. It's immediate, it's like no nothing else in the world would compare to it.

The project's faster tempo when compared to many other forms of academic publishing has an obvious appeal when compared with traditional textual academic output. This is not only because ideas circulate quicker, but also because there can be immediate engagement engendered through emotion. When I spoke with Abhishek Mazumdar, the founder of the Logical Indian for episode 11, he was extremely positive about how this might work to bring about change. The site offers, in its own words, "handpicked, newsworthy stories which deserve the attention of a rational generation." Abhishek gave the example of reading a story about a 'child in need' and then having the means to 'get involved' by putting the contacts to organisations engaged in trying to help at the bottom of the page. He told me, "the best thing about digital is... is you can capitalise your readers' emotions immediately."

Whilst not capitalising on listener's emotions, I do have to think about their perceptions of me as I perform being an anthropologist, whilst keeping a listening public in mind at the same time. If I think it will make for a better interview to demonstrate my knowledge or expertise about a topic with the guest then I do, but often I choose not to (or do so before the recording starts). Once the interview is underway, I balance trying to dig into a topic or idea and keeping the guest comfortable (or uncomfortable), but always with the audience in mind. As such, I often play the naïve yet informed questioner with both interlocutors and scholars, especially at the beginning of the interview. Further to this, the questioning, open-ended nature of the podcast allows for me to avoid having a final analysis on a topic. Rather, the listener and I set forth to discover something together. Such vulnerability-embracing, pretension-eschewing practices are ones which I have tried to take with me into other academic settings (e.g. conferences).

However, the most appealing temporal affordance for anthropological podcasting is, I suggest, not the immediacy of podcasting publishing, but rather immediacy when combined with pause. This is provoked by the specificity of audio as listeners must commit themselves to the conversation: it is difficult to skim read/listen a podcast. If commitment is gained from listeners, even if it is whilst stacking the dishwasher or walking to work, its importance should not be undervalued. Amidst the general pressure and tendency to skim-consume digital content in a distracted manner, it could be considered generous or special that people take the time to listen to a conversation with no immediate obvious message. As such, audio's

linearity (especially when combined with podcasting's subscription based digital infrastructures) makes podcasting markedly different from other forms of digital media and traditional anthropological media consumption.[4]

Concluding remarks

In making an analytical reversal by pointing the 'online gods'' analyses of digital media in India towards our anthropological practices, this article has revealed some of the shared promises contained within the digitalisation of our practices. Using their insights on the enabling (or not) of new ways of speaking, vocal performances, the possibility for immediate publishing, and celebrations of newness I have critiqued, hopefully constructively, the potential of creating aural intimacy and circulating co-presence through podcasting.

Producing podcasts is a craft that, if successful, can create ethnographic authority. There is nothing inherently 'better' about this podcasting craft than the 'standard' ways in which anthropologists create their authority through text. There is also nothing 'purer' about this form of knowledge production (the interlocuter's words and the sonic properties of their voices are manipulated when edited and interpreted). As such, questions of anthropological authority and power remain with this form of digital media, even if some of the tools used for crafting these have changed.

However, it is through using these tools, and with emergence of new crafts, that possibilities reside for different forms of anthropological production, ones in which our outputs are enriched and shaped by the actual voices of the people we research amongst, and within which we might find time for undistracted engagement with the lives of others. This is not a democratising magic bullet that enables authentic subaltern voices to emerge from under the anthropologist's pen, but rather a method that offers the possibility to destabilise the typified voices of authority within the discipline by proposing another way of creating such authority. The listener-activated choice to commit to spend time with linear media like audio might also engender a slowed down appreciation of the thoughts of those we research; an imposed stillness against the rush to consume newness. In short, I hope that spending time together with the voices in our heads can lead to new ways to listen to those with whom we work.

Bharath Ganesh for the invitation to the latter and the insightful comments that it brought forth.

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Notes

1. https://digitalculturedoc.wordpress.com/ accessed 28th September 2019
2. Whilst it could be argued that a site like *Round Table India* is a successful example of a subaltern voice successfully dislocating itself from an elite controlled public sphere, I wonder how much of the subaltern voice remains once its reframed within an academic podcast. It has famously been argued that any attempts by western based or trained academics to let subalterns speak falls down, in part, because of the tendency of "speaking for" the subaltern (Spivak 1988). At first it might appear as if podcasting, by giving voice to research informants could, to some degree, weaken this criticism. However, the hierarchies of western academic framing remain - the podcast is funded by the European Union through a project based at a German university (though with an Indian Principle Investigator) and co-hosted by a British anthropologist based in a central (albeit 'post-socialist') European country. And, moreover, because we choose to make the podcast in English, the class selection of our 'online gods' is elite (with a few exceptions).
3. Without wanting to minimise the very real need for academics to perform productivity to get and keep jobs under conditions of intensifying neoliberal managerialism, nor to ignore the very real possibility that the *Online Gods* podcast series might be read as attempting to be trendy, or the fact that making the podcast is also a paid job, I hope that the methodological experiment exceeds such constraints. Similarly, even if the online unpaid self-work of new media users in India generates a seemingly endless pool of value to be extracted by corporations (Fuchs 2017), the cultural implications of such work are wider than capitalist relations.

4. Though it is possible to listen to podcasts at increased speed, and some listeners seem to prefer this way of consuming content, skipping through audio to only listen to certain sections is much more difficult (though chapter markers, if used, allows for this to some degree). Of course, if a listener loses interest in a podcast, they may just switch it off, whereas they might skip a head to the end of an article.

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