

Email communication as a technology of oppression: Attenuating identity in online research

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Abstract

This paper considers the impact of online communication, especially in the arena of email interviewing, on the reconstruction of participants' voices and identities in environments that potentially provoke a sense of powerlessness and oppression. We argue that the form of the communication, devoid of face to face contact, non-verbal communication and the inflections of people's physical voices, challenges participants, and therefore oppresses them, to find ways of engaging authentically with their interlocutors. In this struggle, despite the constraints of the system, participants try to project their normal lived selves. However fears about the system, e.g. how far it may be an insecure environment which will impugn their privacy, leads participants to be wary about being self-revelatory to online researchers until they have evidence of the values and identities of those researchers, in some cases gleaned from fleeting direct personal or telephonic contact or from information sources that are accessible to them. We draw on evidence from two small scale studies of practitioners in Higher Education, to assert that participants in these qualitative research projects, in their struggle to make meaning of their experiences, learnt to assert power to influence the shape the project, a temporary community of which they had membership, and overcome their initial senses of peripherality, oppression and powerlessness.

Keywords: Power; struggle; email interviews; identity; communities

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Introduction

We live in an environment in which electronic communication pervades every aspect of our lives. There is an email invasion of the working lives of people in Higher Education (HE) that has increased the speed and volume of communication and has intensified the working practices of staff and students in HE. Individuals are often on the receiving end of a broader range of e-communications than they need or want, including solicited and unsolicited emails that clutter up mail boxes and sometimes prevent desired communications arriving, or being sent. This intensification comes from sources that are both external to the institution or subgroups within an institution of which people have membership and internal to it. There always seems to be new emails in our in-trays!

In particular the emergence of email as the dominant form of communication, replacing the slower medium of hard (paper-based) forms, has led to new norms of communicating emerging that expect responses to communications to be quicker, claiming to make the responder more responsive to the sender's demands regardless of the time zone in which the former may be working or the other work in which they might be engaged. Such a norm fits in with the dominant neo-liberal culture that has permeated much of western americano-european working practice, in which customers' demands (needs) are supposed to be paramount and met by 'suppliers' (in this case of information) as rapidly as possible, regardless of what other agenda the suppliers also need or want to meet. Such norms threaten to exert a form of tyranny over the receivers of e-communications through appeals to what is claimed to be 'public morality' or 'shared norms of 'good' practice' between people communicating with each other in a helpful manner. The latter attribute is, in this neo-liberal framework, too, claimed as a cultural norm to which people should subscribe. Lenski (1986) points out how dominant groups or people in societies and organisations assert such cultural norms as a soft means of controlling people's behaviour. It encourages people to regulate themselves (Foucault 1977) by subscribing to such norms and so avoids direct confrontation between dominant groups and subordinates.

In presenting the self online, the bodily presence, as well as outward acts of movement, posture and emotional expression that are important elements in determining how individuals see themselves, and how they are perceived by others, become invisible (Hardey 2002). The faceless nature of e-communication exacerbates the influence of populist pressures, as people learn to police themselves (Foucault 1977) to save themselves hassle. Communication is stripped down to what can be shown on a screen as a result of tapping a keyboard, although the emergence of cheap webcams might allow some elements of participants' corporeality to become more visible. This challenges participants more strongly to know how to engage authentically with their interlocutors than in face to face contacts. The problem of a sense of loss of control in communications, and so of their place socially, is compounded for many people by feeling powerless to exert influence over an e-communications system in which other people appear to make rules for who is to be sent information about what regardless of whether or not the recipients want it. As well as seeming to illustrate Giddens' (1984) theory of structuration, it diminishes people's sense of self-esteem, weakening their positive sense of identity (Giddens, 1991, Kearney, 2003). In other words the system is oppressive.

Contributing to participants' sense of loss of control of their social selves are the inherent dangers in the e-communications environment, as recent media stories have emphasised with discussions about the risk of identity theft, attacks on people's personal communications, and personation in public chatrooms and websites. Insecure websites contribute to this sense of

threat to people's security, privacy, confidentiality and anonymity. This is not merely a matter of ethics – how should people conduct relationships between each other in particular contexts, such as research projects - but represents a loss of power and control of communications by people which contributes to their sense of oppression. To protect themselves people may be hesitant to engage in electronic communications, especially with strangers or relatively unknown people, and to adopt persona or masks (Kearney 2003) behind which to hide. On the other hand the new e-technologies are altering people's senses of identity by giving them new opportunities for communicating with people and gaining (control over) information. In engaging with the new systems of communication and understanding how to manipulate its rules, people are able to assert their agency to reconstruct their identities in new ways (Giddens, 1991, 1984).

In societal cultures where there is a lack of trust about what might be done with hard or e-communications, people may be unwilling to engage in email communication for fear of having their privacy invaded or their economic or personal safety compromised. In different societal cultures loss of face to face interaction and the intensification of work which privileges people's activities as part of an organisation is perceived differently. Hofstede (1991) argued that attributes embedded in national cultures shaped the expectations of behaviour inside organisations in a country so that there was an homogeneity of interpersonal relationships in both national and institutional arenas. One of the key elements of this, he argued, was how people responded to uncertainty and their expectations of leaders in uncertain times, e.g. in the Arab world where face to face communication is important (Shahin, 2004??), and where meanings are not always made explicit, reliance on email communication which has to be explicit in its meaning is potentially problematic.

These problems emerge clearly in higher education where computer-mediated communication has become an integral element of academics' professional lives. Email has changed the way academics engage with students and the way in which individual academics engage with each other and the wider academic community in fostering and developing teaching and research. The use of virtual learning environment (VLE) software, such as 'Blackboard,' in which teachers and students can communicate in the virtual classroom in real time, has altered the way in which academics teach and engage with students. Email and discussion forums, too, offer the possibility of asynchronous communication as tools for teaching and assessment, as well as for communication with a wider population (Foster 1994, Reed 2004).

The new e-technologies are also altering working practices in HE to more isolated forms. Academics, clerical staff and students can work in remote offices or study rooms for days without needing to engage face to face with other members of their communities, thereby attenuating their engagement and identification with those communities. This diminishes the social dimensions of work (place and space) in which people develop their work-related identities. Despite this attenuation of social relationships in the construction of shared meanings and practice, Tight (2004) suggests that every higher education institution is made up of multiple communities of practice, although he does not distinguish between the formal institutional groupings of people (into departments, say) and the communities of practice that may be contained within them in the formal and informal processes of an institution and which are focused around particular practices or approaches to practices.

Research projects, especially those using interpretative or critical discourses, we contend, are one example of the range of communities of practice with which academics and students

engage in HE. Research in the social sciences is a form of intellectual work (Hodkinson, 2004) by which knowledge is constructed and tested through the interactions of participants in the research and in the social situations being researched. Consequently research projects are sites of social community construction and struggle to make meaning and assert agreed norms and values around practice. So they can be conceived as communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) that are also conduits linking their particular work to wider constellations (Wenger 1998) of academic norms and practices. They are joint enterprises (Wenger 1998) in which, through negotiating participation through time, people come to define some aspects of their identities through the social engagement that takes place around the practice / focus of the research project. In the course of the project, researchers and other participants build up a repertoire of skills and knowledge that is specific to that project. The project has within it certain clear boundary markers that help to indicate its identity (Wenger, 1998). Some of its members are nearer its core, and are more influential in shaping the development of that community, than others towards its periphery: Power is distributed asymmetrically but fluidly, connecting researchers and other participants as identifiable members of a project for its duration. Online research projects have similar characteristics but these are mediated almost solely by e-communications, which sets its own peculiar challenges, as we discuss below, rather than by a combination of media of communication.

This paper takes up these themes of the impact of new technologies and the cultures associated with them on social processes, including processes of work and the construction of people's identities; the attenuation of workers' identities and participation in their practice communities and the consequent diminution of the influence of the cultures of such communities on the construction of their identities; and the struggle of individuals to assert and protect their agency and identity and construct communities from positions of remoteness. The last is affected by participant's perceptions of the security or insecurity of the electronic environment in which they work, itself a cultural construct.

Our discussions draw on our experiences in conducting two small scale studies using email interviewing to explore participants' understandings of their professional experiences and developing professional identities. One of the studies investigated the reflections of nine lecturers on the construction of their professional identities both as teachers in higher education and as psychologists. The other study explored with ten mature doctoral students who lived outside Europe their perceptions of the impact on them of becoming part-time students on an extended campus programme of study of an English university. We deliberately chose email because it offered an asynchronous mode of interviewing that addressed the problem of accessing the dislocated and dispersed groups of our participants (Mann and Stewart 2000) and allowed us to build the one-to-one relationships we believed necessary for exploring their discrete views of their developing professional identities and life histories in a variety of different macro and organisational communities. These projects focused on how participants created and sustained their meanings of those communities; constructed their particular values and beliefs; and where they located themselves within those communities – at the core or towards the periphery (Lave and Wenger, 1991). We were also interested in our participants' understanding of those communities as 'shared enterprise' (Wenger, 1998) and of their future intentions and participation in them as a members.

E-technologies (of research) as technologies of oppression and sites of struggle?

A question that arises through this discussion is why individuals adopt certain behaviours online. As Joinson (2005) argues Internet behaviour has highlighted how elements of communication can be lost during online interactions and lacks the richness of real-time face-to-face interaction as the text-based medium of email removes social cues such as gender, race, ethnicity, and age as well as facial expressions and intonation routinely used in understanding face-to-face interactions. Some of our participants commented adversely on the invisibility inherent during the email interview process (James and Busher, 2006), and the lack of normal, especially non-verbal social interactions can also lead to distortions. As King (1996) argues, non-verbal communication and listening are integral to an effective interview. 'Feelings and thoughts, though often unspoken and sometimes denied, form part of a silent or hidden dialogue of the interview' (Weber 1986, p.69).

On the other hand, the virtual reality of online research means that participants and researchers are invisible from each other and so less likely to distort their stated views and perspectives in ways that may arise from the social interactions involved in face to face research (Mann and Stewart, 2000). So the lack of cues may help online communication to be highly personal and more intimate than face-to-face interaction. For example Russell and Bullock (1998) in their study of teachers' professional knowledge found that teachers reflected on a deeper level about their experiences of teaching than had they engaged in face-to-face conversation. Henson et al (2000) also found that teachers were willing to spend time in a reflexive conversation about how they saw themselves as teachers.

The asynchronous nature of email interviews can deprive participants of a sense of engagement in a human conversation. In our studies this was compounded by our sometimes slow responses to participants' queries about the research process or the meaning of some questions. Consequently our participants risked feeling peripheral to the research project and unable to influence its process. In such a sense of marginality, as Wenger (1998) pointed out, lay a lack of sense of commitment to the community of the research project, encouraging participants who perceived themselves in this way to take limited part or drop out altogether. In one of our studies a number of participants dropped out through time. Oakley (1984) suggested the construction of democratic processes in research projects helped to counter this sense of marginality and foster engagement and commitment to a community.

The extent to which participants are willing to be open and honest with researchers in discussing their construction of meanings for some aspect of their lives is likely to depend heavily on the extent to which the researchers have been able to construct an environment for the research which allows participants to feel confident that their privacy is adequately protected if they self-disclose and that the risk of harm to them or their social communities or families (ESRC, 2005) is minimised to a level acceptable to them. The nature of the medium itself highlights the power that researchers potentially have over the other participants. Electronic files are very easy to store and to manipulate later for data analysis – but in this facility also lies a risk that participants' names and addresses can be easily accessible, not least if any computer discs are lost. The open nature of electronic networks makes it more difficult to ensure participants' anonymity (Thach, 1995). Without a safe environment, participants can think that they are at risk of flaming (aggressive tones in online communication) and receiving negative feedback (Smith, 2001), or at risk of having their actions viewed by lurkers (silent participants/ observers in online communications) with whom they might prefer not to communicate. In telling us their stories, some of our

participants revealed concerns about protecting their privacy and anonymity online especially as they were revealing personal (and sometimes sensitive) information about their professional lives and identities (James and Busher, 2006).

Further, we needed to be aware of the cultural and political boundaries of our research participants' lives as well as meeting the requirements of their different legal and cultural systems (AoIR, 2002:3). We were also concerned that in our studies, the records of participants' online conversations, even if carefully processed, could make participants' views instantly visible, depriving participants' of confidentiality and anonymity. This was because their email addresses contained part or all of real names, making it possible in public sites to retrieve messages (Eysenbach and Till, 2001).

The online discussions of our research projects were sites of struggle in another sense, too. Not only did participants have to wrestle with the technicalities of the process and the implications of trying to convey meanings graphically on topics on which they may have preferred to have expressed their tentative developing understandings orally, but they also had to wrestle with the meanings of the questions they were asked, as we, as researchers, had to wrestle with the meanings the participants intended to convey in their writings.

The impact of new technologies on the social processes of work (research projects)

In online communication, communication is stripped down to what can be shown on a screen as a result of tapping a keyboard, although the emergence of cheap webcams might allow some elements of participants' corporeality to become more visible. This challenges participants more strongly than in face to face contacts to know how to engage authentically with their interlocutors. It also challenges them to find ways of dealing with the lack of social signals normal in face to face communications and important in people's construction of social meanings for their actions. At one level it challenges participants to become adept, if not already so, in keyboard, computer skills and internet skills. At another level it challenges them to become adept at expressing themselves about sensitive and personal topics graphically rather than orally. So it further challenges participants to develop their use of language, since it is through this medium alone that they are now able to express their thoughts and feelings.

Within the virtual reality of the Internet, synchronous and asynchronous interviewing can be established as a space in which participants can explore their changing self perceptions. But whereas synchronous communications, whether on email or in chatrooms or on VLEs, can impose restrictive time frames on participants, especially when they live in different time zones, asynchronous communications seem to offer participants considerable flexibility in their use of time. As participants begin to understand how the space /time of asynchronicity can be used in a research project it encourages them to use these properties of the system to enrich their discussions. For example we made use of the property of email to keep on record and on view all the turns of a discussion in each email exchange. In our studies the record of past turns in each discussion remained on view to participants and researchers as the participants constructed their narratives of their work-related identities, allowing them to revisit their earlier contributions and reflect on them as they wished. In doing so, we argue, they enriched their reflections on their narratives in the ways that participants did in studies by Henson et al (2000) and Mann and Stewart (2000). Our participants discovered how time

could be used to meet their agendas as well as those of ourselves, the researchers, as we have discussed earlier.

As our studies developed, collaboration and discourses emerged between ourselves and our participants that constituted, we argue, the construction of a particular or small culture (Holliday, 2005) which reflected the developing shared meanings of participating in each research project. In the course of each project these cultures began to replace the dominant discourses of the researchers who had begun the studies. The virtual setting of the email research interview was akin to the third spaces which lie between different institutional practices (Bhabha, 1994 in Childs and Williams, 1997) and which participants colonise with different perspectives when they meet together and begin to construct new communities (Holliday 1994). As we discuss later, this 'colonisation' marked the beginnings of a transfer of some ownership of the research projects to our participants through the process of narrative construction. Within the social, intellectual and chronological spaces that exist in the formal processes of interviews, the participants in our studies began to write and reflect on their narratives, but to a time schedule that suited their own professional and personal lives, rather than that set by the researchers. Participants who began by apologising for being late in responding to us ended up, like ourselves, taking it for granted that replies would happen on an irregular basis to fit in with participants' lives. However a subtext of this, after some members of each research project had dropped out, was that the responses would be sent, even if only in due course. As the research projects progressed, researchers and participants alike came to accept these 'delays' as the normal, if unexpected pace of the email based research process. Like Russell and Bullock (1999), we came to discover that an exciting element of the process was that we never quite knew when we were going to get a response from whom.

We hoped that investing in a collaborative relationship with the participants that involved mutuality and reciprocity (Oakley 1984) would lead to more enriched narratives. The participants' lack of inhibition and frankness (Holge-Hazelton 2002) enriched the interviews as they wrote about how their identities were socially constructed and multifaceted. They all seemed to want to reflect upon, and transmit their experiences faithfully, including aspects of both their professional and personal lives. Perhaps this was also because '...the positive effects of the researcher's prior knowledge of the participants led to a more reflexive commentary' (Wicksteed 2000:477).

The attenuation of participant's identities and membership of research project communities

The complexity of self, identity and perspective occurs in face-to-face research as well as online research and affects how participants present themselves in conversations and actions in the conduct of research (Gatson and Zweerink, 2004: 191). This is particularly evident in email interviewing, where it is not always possible for the researcher to verify the identity of the participants. There is also opportunity for 'performance' as the participants' can 'play' with their identity in the social space (Hardey, 2004). This creates the potential for participants to reconstruct their identities. LeBesco (2004:575) describes this as an 'act of identification' through which participants can present themselves unhindered by visual images. '...Disembodiment and anonymity allows users to take on many new identities that may have little connection to their off-line selves' Hardey (2004:195). This potentially threatens the trustworthiness of the research and the outcomes of a research project. In email interviewing, we realized that without prior knowledge of our participants it would be

difficult to verify the identity of our participants or to cross-reference their views and perspectives through normal processes of triangulation, not least through processes of observation and participating in the social situations which are being explored through other participants. Some researchers have argued that online environments and identities are valid in themselves and do not need to be verified off-line (Hine, 2000).

However these shifts in people's identities do not only happen in interviews and online exchanges but in everyday life too (James and Busher 2006), as individuals review and rewrite their histories and perspectives in the light of their developing experiences. The construction of identity includes a dimension of complexity and fluidity (Giola and Thomas, 1996). It is inextricably linked with who we are, our commitments and values and is 'integral and continuous' (Kendal, 1999). It leads Mann and Stewart (2000:210) to reflect that, 'for this reason it is seen to be difficult to sustain a persona which is quite divorced from the 'real' self.'

One of the consequences of the faceless nature of the online interview and the instrumentally focused information conveyed in its written texts, is that many of the informal and socially oriented discussions and comments that often form part of the preludes and postludes of face to face interviews, especially where those are part of a series of discussions, are missing. For example, at those points where participants in our studies wanted confirmation of their part in the purposes and processes of the research, affirmation which in face-to-face research may equally be given through non-verbal as verbal signals, was not available. In response to this shortage of information, participants withheld, even if only temporarily, their consent to continue to participate because they were not sufficiently informed at that point in time about the privacy of what they were disclosing, and how anonymous their identities would remain in the online environment. For us, this reiterated that:

...the virtual and often anonymous nature of Internet communication means that researchers must establish their bona fide status and the boundaries of the study more carefully than in a face-to-face situation

(Sanders, 2005:78).

This void makes it difficult to develop some of the assumptions of shared views and perspectives that may develop in face to face qualitative or critical research projects, i.e. of communities with a common purpose, and facilitates the interactions of researchers and participants. It is these which importantly help to establish a shared or collaborative approach to a project. A key element of such an approach is establishing trust. Although we made participants aware that our conversations were not taking place in a private setting (Barnes, 2004), such as a password protected website, and hence of the risk this posed to their privacy, many people we approached chose to give us their explicit informed consent to participate, although some did not. We speculate that this willingness to take part reflected a degree of confidence which the participants had in us as researchers. We think this was in large measure due to having established trusting face to face interpersonal relationships with many of them before we began our research projects, as well as to us establishing explicit codes of engagement in the communities of the research projects. Two participants in one of our studies commented:

'It is very important the interviewer/interviewee relationship is existing and positive. Establishing a good rapport and background generally is as in every interview essential - especially in case of sensitive questions...'

'Clearly it helped me to know who was on the other end of the line- I'm not sure what 'persuasion' one can use if one were to try this approach 'cold'.

LeBesco (2004), too, found collaborative approaches shifted the nature of engagement that participants had with research project communities to that of a greater sense of being core members of the project / community.

Re-asserting the self in the insecure environments of online research

If e-technologies of communication deprive participants and researchers of some senses of control in the construction of discussions, their properties also offer sources of power for participants. In one of our studies the absence of visual cues seemed to make it easier for some participants to start and terminate their interviews as and when it suited them despite text-based cues such as: *'Haven't heard from you in a while. I wondered if you still wished to continue the interview?'* While it can be argued that this demonstrates the voluntary nature of participants' engagement with the research, it might also be interpreted as a means whereby participants' where asserting power, either by withdrawing their consent, albeit temporarily, to being part of the research project, or by choosing to respond to questions on a time schedule that suited their busy professional lives rather than the time schedule of the research project that was initially created by the researchers.

Control of time and speed of response were also means whereby participants asserted control over the research process, despite our attempts to set and keep to a pre-ordained time frame for the research project. Interviews that had been scheduled by the researchers to take a matter of two to three weeks eventually extended in many cases over several months. In the online dialogues we jointly constructed, some participants noted the value to them of asynchronicity. It gave them the space / opportunity to develop their thoughts more deeply than they might have done in a real-time face to face interview where the rhythm of the interaction might have been more strongly controlled by a researcher and by contextual factors, such as the other demands on participants' time. As a participant commented:

I didn't email you straight back, because I was thinking about my answer. So my responses were more carefully thought through and probably longer than if I'd tackled the whole thing in a face-to-face interview ... This is what's good about the email process ...

Through time it became apparent that the participants exercised influence, too, in the shaping of the research project community, and changed the nature of the research process. Prompt replies, we discovered, were not actually necessary, particularly when slower ones gave opportunity for more powerful reflection on the main focus of the studies. Like Selwyn and Robson (1998) we discovered that asynchronicity was an attractive and creative feature of email interviewing. It marked a shift in power, from researcher driven semi-structured interview schedules to a more collaboratively constructed reflexive dialogic one.

Further participants took the conversations in directions of their own as they sought to make sense of their experiences of their work-related lives. However, this strengthening of participants' control raised the potential risk of the interviews having an increasingly selective focus (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) and the risk that important points might not be fully discussed or poorly developed, as the routes the conversations took became ones we had not originally anticipated. The interview schedules remained as aide-memoires to help us to avoid

such narrowing of foci, as well as being a means of re-asserting our original research agenda in the (re)construction of the practices and foci of the research project community as its members developed their repertoire of skills in constructing online narratives about their changing work-related identities..

Conclusion

Despite the invasive nature (Reed 2004) of e-communications, it can provide a resource through which academics can share the development of their ideas with a wider community of people than just those in their own institutions or subgroups of those institutions. It raises the spectre of the existence of extended communities untrammelled by space and time, that develop common purposes around repertoires of particular skills, i.e. appear to be communities of practice (Wenger 1998). However it also questions whether such diffuse groups of people are really communities or networks of practice.

E-communications are invasive. As systems with attached cultural norms and values they serve as conduits through which assertive people and groups in various societies oppress and challenge other individuals, whether academics or students, into adapting and re-constructing their understandings of their identities and their relationships with other people with whom they share membership of various communities. The flows of power in this process are endless as we have attempted to illustrate. Because of the increased (intensified) speed of communications the changes of meaning happen more quickly, as well as potentially more diversely, challenging individuals to work more quickly on the projects of themselves as well on the formal work projects, such as the construction of knowledge through research, in which they are engaged. So people are oppressed.

However not only are academics oppressed by the social and technical systems of e-communications and have to struggle to re-assert themselves through engaging with it and its associated rule systems, but they are themselves oppressors, using the properties of e-communications to engage with students and research participants in ways that would have been difficult without access to such apparently easy distance communications. In our reflections on this we have noticed how students and research participants find ways of re-asserting themselves, giving voice to their own values and personal and social needs, and in doing so re-negotiating the parameters of engagement in the communities of practice, such as qualitative and critical research projects of which they have membership. In doing this the small / micro-cultures of such projects seem to shift to become more collaborative, although researchers and still appear to have access to considerable influence and power to shape their processes. This dynamic process of the construction of academic communities needs further investigation.

E-communications do offer advantages, too. They provide a different medium in which academics and students can research and learn. Although it may be difficult to verify the identities of the people taking part in online qualitative research communities, we think that, generally, participants portray their authentic lived selves although the evidence for this is problematic, rather than any elaborated different persona. This is greatly facilitated if researchers are able to have at least some face to face contact with other participants in the research. If physical interpersonal contact or presence is not possible it leads us to speculate that webcams and secure websites may offer important opportunities for social networking as adjuncts to online qualitative research.

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