

Reflexivity and reflection in an Australian mobile phone study

A methodological discussion

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ABSTRACT: *This paper is a discussion about methods and reflexivity in qualitative mobile communication research. The Australian research project on which this paper draws investigates how mobile phone use contributes to the meanings constructed through interpersonal relationships with others and how mobile phone use interacts with many other communication activities. The original methods chosen for the discursive analysis highlighted the reflexivity within the project. The main methods of data collection used were a research journal, semi-structured interviews, and the collation of cultural artifacts produced in communicative culture. During researcher data collection and analysis, the significance of the methods combined emerged as vital in the interpretation of interviews. This paper contextualises the combination of these particular methods to reveal how reflexivity may be enhanced in mobile communication research*

Reflexivity and reflection

The methodological premise and methods used in a research project are often seen as a 'necessary ordeal' (Allen & Rumbold, 2004, p. 100), and yet a clear methodological approach is the basis for all research. One of the methodological features researchers must contend with as a part of this 'necessary ordeal' is the matter of reflexivity. Rather than taking the more common track of focusing on 'reflective' and 'reflexive' activities as problems at a theoretical and abstract level (Woolgar, 1988, p. 2), this paper contextualises the combination of particular methods to reveal

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how reflexivity may be enhanced in mobile communication research. Rather than an argument for or advocacy of any particular method, this paper is a discussion about methods and reflexivity in qualitative mobile phone communication research. I will discuss the processes of reflection and reflexivity, the differences between the two, and why these processes were important in my research. In doing so, this paper contributes to the growing work on the concept and practice of reflexivity and mobile communication research methods.

The past decade has seen a burgeoning of research on mobile media in various disciplines across the globe (Bianchi & Phillips, 2005; Brown, Green, & Harper, 2001; Castells, Fernández-Ardèvol, Linchuan, & Sey, 2006; Glotz, Bertschi, & Locke, 2005; Ito, Okabe, & Matsuda, 2005; Katz, 2006, 2008; Kavoori & Arceneaux, 2006; Ling, 2004, 2008; Prøitz, 2005; Rheinhold, 2003; Thulin & Vilhelmson, 2007). A substantial amount of research is emerging from Australia and New Zealand, some of which is published in this special issue of the *Australian Journal of Communication* (Arnold & Klugman, 2003; Beaton & Wajcman, 2004; Goggin, 2006; Hjorth, 2005; Richardson, 2005; DCITA, 2005; Cameron, 2006; Carroll et al., 2001; Gillard, Bow, & Wale, 1994; Hassan, 2006; Horstmanshof & Power, 2005; Walsh, White, & Young, 2007; Yusuf & Naseri, 2003). Until recently, there have been very few discussions on the notion of reflection and reflexivity in the study of mobile phones. Reflexivity, in some respects, has been discussed by mobile communication researchers (Woolgar, 2005; Caron & Caronia, 2007; Habuchi, 2005). I aim to extend these discussions, with particular focus on the level of the researcher and how reflexivity may work in respect to discourse analysis.

Discourse analysis is used widely in communication research (Barker & Galasinski, 2003; Gee, 2005; Lee & Poynton, 2000; Schirato & Yell, 2000); it is also used in mobile communication research (Christensen, 2007; Ganea & Nacula, 2006; Matsuda, 2005; Pellegrino, 2007; Poutiainen, 2007; Thurlow, 2003; Weerakkody, 2007; Yung, 2003, 2005). However, much of this work has either come from a different disciplinary approach (such as linguistics or social psychology) or has not discussed in detail the reported research. An aim of this paper is to make this process of interpretation as explicit as possible, as this is an important consideration in discourse analysis (Potter, 1988). In this project, discourse analysis is understood as the investigation of the social construction of meaning. This definition grounds discourse as 'an interrelated set of texts, and the practices of their production, dissemination, and reception, that brings an object into being' (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 3).

Of course, reflexivity is an issue for all researchers, and, in particular, qualitative researchers, who become the 'instrument of enquiry' (Willis, 2006, p. 260). And, undeniably, a theoretical understanding of reflexivity is at the core of all well-planned and well-executed research. However, 'much of the work that advocates reflexivity is theoretical in nature and eschews methodological discussion' (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 84). The discussion here does not claim to have a universal answer for these methodological oversights; rather, through sharing my research experiences, this evaluation adds to ongoing discussions about conducting and creating reflective and reflexive research practice and mobile communication research methods.

Defining reflective and reflexive practices

When a researcher is 'reflecting' as a research practice, they are interpreting; they are bringing to light what they see, and they reproduce as closely as possible what it is they see or understand in the research process. For example, the process of writing this article is reflective. That is, in order for this independent research experience and practice to be shared, I must carefully recreate images of what has happened. One of the sources of data in my doctoral research was a research journal. The use of the research journal in this research also illustrates the notion of 'reflectivity'. The research journal was used as a method to observe and reflect on communication events. The reflection sometimes took place at the time of writing the observations, but sometimes took place at a later date. The research journal was designed to allow for this reflection. The 'observations' could include media events heard or seen. The research journal allowed for direct observations of my (I am in the age group being studied) and other people's mobile phone uses.

My research project investigated the social and cultural effects of mobile phone use by individuals aged 18 to 35 years living in the Hunter region of New South Wales. My research considered the discourses facilitating social meaning construction for mobile phones and their use, and it examined how mobile phone use is reshaping how we engage within our culture. The research used discourse analysis as both a guiding methodology and as a distinct set of methods.

Reflexive research practice is distinct from reflective approaches. Reflexivity is a 'whole research' approach and 'commences with a clear understanding of one's self in the research process' (Willis, 2006, p. 261). When a researcher is being reflexive in their research, they

are often being 'reflective'; they take their reflections one step further and incorporate them into their own subjectivity, contributing to the ongoing research process. Consequently, 'reflexivity involves reflecting on the ways in which research is carried out and understanding how the process of doing research shapes its outcomes' (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 83). This is a transformative process, as the researcher interrogates 'their own world as well as that of their subjects and generate[s] new insights by investigating interruptions. Their research is neither self nor subject orientated but is concerned with the dialectics of the relationship' (Linstead, cited in Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 83), and it is this ongoing dialogical negotiation between the 'subject' of the researcher and the 'object' of the research that I analyse in this paper. Indeed, some scholars argue that discourse analysis affords reflexive practice in empirical work (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, pp. 83-85) and that discourse analysis itself can 'be seen as a form of reflexive practice' (Potter, 1988, p. 51).

Turning OFF the mobile phone

The texts collected and used as data in my research came from a range of sources, and the examples that I use for this paper are drawn from all three: the research journal mentioned above, which allowed for direct observations of my and other people's mobile phone uses; 18 in-depth interviews; and the collection of cultural artifacts from the broader material culture, which included advertisements, pamphlets, newspaper articles, radio broadcasts (and their transcripts or Podcasts where available), television broadcasts, magazine clippings, sale messages, official statistics, laws, mobile phones, and other references to mobile phones and their use in the media, including transcripts of online forums. It was the intersection of all three sources that helped to generate reflexivity in the research. In my doctoral thesis and in other papers, emphasis is on the interview data; however, here I focus on the research journal. I begin this critique with a few examples to illustrate both the reflective and reflexive processes that occurred throughout the research. The first example is from the research journal. It comes from early in the research, during April, 2006. It reads:

My parents requested that I don't use my mobile phone as much when at their house (the family home), wanting my attention to be with them when I am visiting (Research Journal, April 2006).

The reason my parents had made this request was because I already had, on a few occasions, either answered an incoming call or attended to a text message while I was visiting them. My actions had clearly bothered them, hence their request. Making decisions about whether to leave a mobile phone on or off and choosing whether or not to answer it when it rings signifies broader communication issues of respect and preference. In making these decisions (or being asked to by loved ones or others), choices are made about what or who is more important—the person whom I am with, or the person who is trying to contact me right now? The observation, notation, and reflection of this request affected the research process. The reflection on this 'communication event' directly resulted in my revising the questions for the in-depth interviews and adding extra questions:

- When would you turn your phone off?
- How often do you turn your mobile phone off?
- Where would you turn your mobile phone off?
- Where wouldn't you? When was the last time that you did? Why?
- What stops you from using your mobile phone?
- At what times would you not take your mobile phone with you?
- Do you answer all calls, or do you sometimes screen out calls?
- When? Why? How?

In addition to having a direct effect on this specific part of the research process, the answers to these questions offered new data for analysis and highlighted both the conditions of everyday mobile phone etiquette (informal rules within the discourse of use) and one of the guiding themes of the discourse—wanting to be connected and being relentlessly contactable.

Another way this example enhanced reflexivity within the actual research process was that, as a result of my attention being drawn to these issues, the way that I understood and handled both the participants' and my mobile phone use in the interviews was affected. Over the course of the interviews, the way I dealt with both the matter of switching off (or silencing) the mobile phones in the interviews and the use of the mobile phones during the interviews developed. Early in the interviewing, I discovered that some participants were silencing or switching off their mobile phones for the interview. For example, for one of the first meetings, I arrived after the participant (they had chosen to have lunch before the interview in the same

café). It was some time into the interview that I discovered that they had purposefully turned off their mobile phone and put it away in their rucksack before I arrived. It was only when I asked 'What kind of ringtone do you have?', and the participant responded with 'If you want me to start up my phone I could play it for you?' that I recognised they had done this as a sign of respect for the interview context, so that there could not be any interruptions and they could give their full attention. However, I was interested in all and any interactions that they had with their mobile phone, and having the object at hand during the interview meant that I was able to see their phone. It allowed them to give demonstrations with it (of ring tones, wallpapers, images stored, etc.). Having the object physically in the space while we talked about it and the participants' uses of it facilitated these actions. Hence, when I became aware of participants doing this (turning off and putting away their mobile phones) at the beginning of interviews, I drew their attention to this and stated that they did not have to switch off their mobile phones and that they could 'feel free to answer it'. Later, when a participant's mobile rang during the interview and they answered it, interrupting the interview for a moment, this opened up further discussion. This was the second time that Michael's mobile phone had rung during the interview:

I think the best thing about a phone is that it can link you to other—[his phone rings]. Aw geez. That's all I have to say about it. See it's—I can't really—[he answers his phone].

Although Michael had started to say that he thought the 'best thing' about the mobile phone was that it connects you to other people, when his mobile phone actually rang, his tone immediately changed to indicate that the mobile phone was an annoyance and disruptive. By being aware of how a participant's mobile phone could interrupt the research process, and by allowing this to happen, I was able to gain valuable data that highlighted the 'nuance, contradictions, and areas of vagueness' (Potter, 1988, p. 48) within the discourse. There was a contrast 'between what people *seem* to be saying and what they are *really saying*' (author's emphasis) (Potter, 1988, p. 48).

As the researcher, I chose to turn off both my personal mobile phone and the research mobile phone. I was being self-aware, as a researcher, of how my mobile phone could interrupt the research process in a different (and possibly negative) way. The research journal allowed me to think these ideas through and develop them further. Specific

examples of extended 'discussion' are limited in the research journal entries, as it was not used as a diary system to discuss points. Rather, the journal was used to observe, notate, and then later reflect on 'communication events' that were concerned with the initial research topic. The process of observing both my use and others' uses meant that I became more self-aware of my research actions and choices while comparing the differences between people's practices and between findings from different sources of data. This also contributed to the research in a structural sense, providing a dimension for comparing the practices of different people (this is common) and the other sources of incoming data.

Negotiating social rules

The next example draws on multiple sources of data. Two excerpts are from my research journal and the other is from a news story. In this instance, the different sources became an important opportunity for me as researcher to be reflexive, but also for me as a mobile phone user to be mindful.

Wedding—during the speeches I saw two young women at a table playing with their phones—they were prominently placed on the table. During the father of the bride's speech one of them proceeded to send and receive texts—during the speech!
(Research Journal, May 2006)

The process of recording this observation of other people using their mobile phones meant that I became more critical of my own use.

Six months later, an incident occurred that is thematically related to the first. In January 2007, a reporter for NineMSN wrote about a café in Brisbane where the breakdown in relations between staff and customer had led to a 'final demand' being made of customers. The café 'put up signs requesting customers not to use mobile phones, in the hope of obtaining a respite from the incessant ringing and some old-fashioned respect' (Ford, 2007, paragraph 3). Other cafés within Brisbane's domestic airport were also 'making a stand, refusing to serve anyone who is talking on a mobile phone' (Ford, 2007, paragraph 4). This article highlighted the active negotiation of existing social rules about communication between customers and café staff in relation to mobile phones. Café staff and owners rejected the way customers were behaving and in some cases made customer service conditional

on 'appropriate' behaviour. The café owners were reported as saying that if customers wanted good service 'they should get off the phone' (Ford 2007, paragraph 2).

The reflexive effect became particularly clear to me at the moment of the following entry, recorded during May this year:

Bottle shop Friday night. My mobile rang as I was about to pay. I answered and handed the phone to my partner. The woman behind the counter actually thanked me for doing so. (Research Journal, May 2008)

This incident brought to my notice that, over time, my use had changed. It had changed to the extent that it was being noticed by others, and, moreover, it had changed in a way that stood out as different from other people's use. The woman's thanks indicated that my behaviour was not routine or taken for granted. Through the observation and notation of other people's uses of the mobile phone, over time, I became more conscious of my personal use of the mobile and the likely preferences of others.

Discussion

The particular methods chosen for this research project intensified the reflection and reflexivity of the discourse analysis. The research journal was observational, as the entry of the exchange with my family indicates. This and other observations were then applied within a number of interviews where I asked questions to explore the experience and choices of others: how they constructed the meaning of turning off the mobile phone and how they negotiated moments of conflicting expectations. The methods, combined and developed, facilitated my self-awareness and changed my behaviour. They shaped both my mobile phone use as a researcher (the mobile phone was my main point of contact with participants) and my personal use.

This paper is an attempt to further my reflection and self-awareness of these developments. Also, through these methods, I became, and I hold myself to be, 'accountable to the standards of knowing and telling of the people' I have studied (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 964). In fact, I believe that these methods *combined* have been essential, indeed critical, to the project. I think that if I had been completely oblivious of my research position and my own personal use of the mobile phone,

the research activities and outcomes would have been weaker. As a researcher in communication, it was critically important to investigate in the research journal both my use and other people's uses. It was then important to put into research practice what those observations revealed, while becoming knowledgeable about other people's uses. I believe that good quality research comes from a self-aware position. In trying to understand the broader social construction of meaning, I also need to engage in how I construct meaning subjectively. And this is why these methods have played an integral role in the reflective and reflexive processes of the research project. This has been a transformative experience in a number of ways.

As a reflexive researcher, I am aware that writing this paper is a part of the discursive construction, through the texts I choose, the language I use, and the interpretations I make.

Conclusion

This paper has considered the notions of reflection and reflexivity and has discussed how these may be applied in the study of mobile communication. It reflects on the multiple methods used in mobile communication research. It also discusses how the methods chosen (a research journal, semi-structured interviews, and the collation of cultural artifacts produced in communicative culture) for the discursive analysis created reflexivity within the project. In doing so, previous discussions of reflexivity have been extended by concentrating on the detailed level of meaning-making in research, and on how reflexivity (and the processes of interpretation) may work in discourse analysis. When I began my qualitative research, I wished to create a research process that allowed reflexivity. This paper discusses how the use of different sources of data generated reflexivity in the project and enhanced my awareness of my own mobile phone practices. I think that, if I were less aware of my own communication using the mobile phone, the research outcomes would have been weaker and qualitatively different. Applying discourse analysis across the three methods has forced me to analyse my own observations as well as the interviews and media. As Richardson and St. Pierre would say, I have become 'both a producer and a product of this text' (2005, p. 964).

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