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The Performance of Youth Voice on the Airwaves

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The Performance of Youth Voice on the Airwaves

Abstract

This paper uses the case study of a youth-led community radio station, KCC Live, to argue that community radio is not a cure-all solution for disenfranchised and silenced young people. Drawing on 18 months of participant observation at KCC Live and data from in-depth interviews with volunteers, I argue that, owing to institutional constraints by station management; college management; and the regulatory body Ofcom, young people consider the airwaves to be a supervised, as opposed to emancipatory, arena. However, in attempting to combat the restricting nature of the airwaves, young people find new, performative ways to communicate. This paper provides empirical evidence which goes *beyond* previous simplistic conceptualisations of voice in youth media production and argues that romanticised notions of youth voice preclude performance and creativity. This paper offers an important contribution to children's geographies in finding that pretend play, characterised by performance, can be considered a 'life-span activity'.

Key words: Community radio; Performance; Qualitative research; Young people; Youth voice

Introduction

The notion of voice has been important in research relating to the emancipation of marginalised individuals and groups, approaching voice as a means to assert power for those who lack it (Cairns, 2009; Mitra, 2009; Wagg, 2004). 'Voice' has become increasingly fashionable, although it is recognised as a slippery (Arnot and Reay, 2007) and fetishised (Soep and Chávez, 2010) concept. The literature on youth voice is predominantly concerned with educational institutions. Youth voice in this instance comes under the rubric of 'pupil' or 'student' voice, and explores the extent to which young people have a say in issues affecting these institutions (see Bragg, 2007; Mitra, 2009). This paper seeks to extend the literature on youth voice through examining an example of an alternative arena (community radio) where youth voice is performed and enacted. There has been remarkably little academic attention given to youth

voice in this setting, despite the obvious association that community radio is an aural/verbal medium.

In bringing together community radio and youth voice, this paper uses a case study of youth-led community radio station KCC Live, based in the Metropolitan Borough of Knowsley, neighbouring Liverpool, UK. This paper argues that community radio is not a cure-all solution for disenfranchised and silenced young people, as young people at KCC Live work within a restricted idea of speech. I argue that, owing to various institutional constraints, by station management; college management; and the regulatory body Ofcom¹, young people consider the airwaves to be a supervised, as opposed to emancipatory, arena. However, in attempting to combat the restricting nature of the airwaves, young people find new, performative ways to communicate. This paper argues that engaging with performance more liberally than scholars have done before (e.g. Stiernstedt, 2014) in the study of radio enables insight into the ways in which performance is not just an act of refinement and sanitisation, but also an act of exaggeration and caricature.

I begin this paper by introducing the case partner, KCC Live. I then review debates on youth voice and community radio before introducing the methodology for this project. The remainder of the article draws on data gathered to provide a detailed analysis of the performance of youth voice on the airwaves. Here, I explore restrictions to voice and performance of voice, before emphasising the importance of going *beyond* previous simplistic conceptualisations of voice in the Conclusion. Further, the Conclusion emphasises the important contribution of this paper to children's geographies in finding that pretend play, characterised by performance, can be considered a 'life-span activity'.

¹ The Office of Communications, commonly known as Ofcom, is the government-approved regulatory and competition authority for the broadcasting, telecommunications and postal industries of the United Kingdom

Case partner

KCC Live is a youth-led community radio station in Knowsley, neighbouring Liverpool, UK. Founded in 2003, KCC Live was set up as a college enrichment and work experience radio station, based at Knowsley Community College. KCC Live acts as an important element of the college's retention strategy and intends to function as a bridge for young people Not in Education, Employment or Training to re-enter the labour market. The station typically has a 14-25 year-old volunteer base (KCC Live, 2007), although at the time of conducting this research all volunteers were aged over 16, and there were a number of volunteers over the age of 25.

As a 'youth-led' radio station, unpaid volunteers from the college and the community assume the role of presenters, producers, newsreaders, copywriters, segue-technicians, music programmers, web-editors, designers, and assistant managers. Since the station's conception, there have been around 50-200 volunteers at any one time. In 2009, Ofcom awarded KCC Live a five-year licence to broadcast on 99.8FM; this licence was extended for a further five years in 2014. The move to FM increased the broadcast range of KCC Live beyond Knowsley Community College to the Borough of Knowsley. KCC Live broadcasts 24 hours a day seven days a week, with a combination of live and pre-recorded shows on FM, online, and via smartphone application.

KCC Live endeavours to serve an audience with characteristics unique to young people in the deprived Borough of Knowsley. The station has four key aims: encourage the positive self-image of a young audience; provide minority voice representation; actively engage with the citizenship agenda and ideas of responsibility; and engage young people in non-commercial radio, through the provision of niche music programming (KCC Live, 2007). The station's target audience is 10-24 year-olds in the centre of the borough.

Youth voice on the airwaves

The literature on youth voice and community radio is predominantly concerned with community radio as giving voice to community members who are economically, linguistically, or politically marginalised (e.g. Dahal and Aram, 2013; Podkalicka and Staley, 2009; Tsarwe, 2014). It has been argued that, in producing a radio show, young people gain agency in the production of their own audio, thereby affording them a voice they are often deprived of in school and family settings (Wagg, 2004). Using the case of CKUT Campus-Community Radio, Wagg (2004) finds that marginalised young people are enfranchised through media production, using this process as an outlet for their voices. Wagg (2004) argues that the act of sharing texts is empowering for young people, irrespective of the size, or even presence, of an audience. That is, it is ‘the legitimacy of discursive space’ that is the most enfranchising (Wagg, 2004, 68). Central to this is the idea that the airwaves ‘affirms a worthy sense of self’ (Wagg, 2004, 275) through the vocalisation of words, ideas, thoughts, and opinions.

Most existing literature considers voice in its literal sense, as projected through the airwaves. Weller’s (2006, 304) research on radio phone-ins found that stations create ‘participatory spaces’, which allow previously muted young people to express their opinions. She offers a lens on the effectiveness of radio phone-ins in adding importance to young people’s voices, through assigning space for issues important to them. This is mirrored by Kranich and Patterson’s (2008, 27) assertion that ‘youth media fills an important step in truly amplifying youth voice by connecting the many voices that have never had the opportunity to connect with compassionate teenagers’. Consistent with this, Glevarec and Choquet (2003) maintain that young people find a space on the airwaves to engage in meaningful interactions in which they communicate their own issues, and acquire knowledge of others’ experiences. In this view, radio functions as a facilitator in projecting and receiving youth voices.

So far, 'youth voice' on the airwaves has been presented as an idealised vision. One of the most cogent criticisms levelled at youth voice concerns its claims to authenticity. Discussing children's voice, Komulainen (2007, 13) argues: 'what is 'true' and 'real' about voices remains an unresolved puzzle'. In this reading, youth voice is detached from its representation as the ideal product of media communication. For Komulainen (2007, 13), despite being a powerful rhetorical device, the child's voice is socially constructed through the very 'socialness' of human interaction, discourses and practice. In an analysis of voice in educational discourse, Juffermans and Van der Aa (2013, 112) argue, 'the production of voice is always situated, socially determined, and institutionally organized'. Similarly, Komulainen (2007) reminds us that voice is not constant across an individual's lifespan; rather, it is fluid and mutable, changing over time and space. Fleshing out this point, James (2007) argues that projects that profess to 'give voice' to young people can gloss over the diversity of their individual lifeworlds, presenting them as a homogenous group. Community radio, then, must account for the variety and multiplicity of young people's voices.

Bemoaning the fetishisation of youth voice by media producers and scholars as individual, authentic, and untainted expression, Soep and Chávez (2010) argue that Youth Radio, the radio station at the centre of their analysis, does not simply provide young people with recording devices and 'give' them voice. Instead, it encourages young people to connect with their senses and experiences of their social worlds, and to examine and interrogate other points of view. Thus, scholars should not position youth voice as the outcome, yet instead consider it as a starting point that advances a complex set of questions (see also Cairns, 2009; Chan, 2006). Such questions might include: whose voices are being heard? How have these voices been negotiated? It is in this vein that Soep (2006) argues that there is a need to go *beyond* voice in youth media production. This is in acknowledgment that the notion of youth voice as connoting free expression is an over-simplification. Rather, young people have the potential to adjust,

amplify and experiment with a selection of genuine and illusive voices; for instance, finishing off someone else's sentence, and mimicking the speech of an individual or group. For Soep (2006, 199), use of reported speech by youth media producers results in 'crowded talk', and is underpinned by constant self and peer evaluation. Thus, contradictory voices and interests can exist within youth media projects.

Performance, speech and radio

Considering Soep's (2006) discussion of young people's ability to experiment with voice, this paper positions performance as a lens through which to consider youth voice on the airwaves. The geographical literature has predominantly been characterised by two alternative discussions of performance, those of Goffman (1959; 1967; 1981) and Butler (1993; 1997). For Goffman (1959) performance is characterised by a series of dramaturgical metaphors, including the world as stage; stage management; setting; front and back regions; guises; and stage props. Goffman (1959, 17) argues that individuals sometimes act 'in a thoroughly calculating manner', in order to communicate a certain impression and to provoke a desired response. This dramaturgical approach is concerned with strategic impression management and primed improvisation in everyday life, through which individuals communicate their intentions, circumstances and relationships. Goffman (1959, 109; 114) uses the term 'front region' to describe the place in which the performance is delivered, and 'back region' or 'backstage' to describe where the performer drops his/her front and offers a more 'authentic' act.

Goffman (1959) discusses performance in relation to the competence, and more so incompetence, of radio presenters. In radio, the back region is defined by all places out of range of 'live' microphones (Goffman, 1959). Front stage, radio presenters are careful to 'put their best foot forward'; their on-air performances are wary and self-conscious (Goffman, 1981,

198). Further, radio presenters work to produce speech that is fluent and spontaneous; faults reflect speech production problems, and speech production is not homogenous (Goffman, 1981). In this view, radio presenters are focussed on the seamless delivery of scripts and are intended to be a 'perfect speech machine' (Goffman, 1981, 233). Although ordinary talk is replete with technical faults that go unnoticed, broadcasters are schooled to realise that speech production will be 'without influences, slips, boners, and gaffes, i.e. unfaultable' (Goffman, 1981, 240). Goffman (1981) maintains that when performance obligations are being satisfied, the announcer is projecting an image of himself/herself as a competent professional.

A small body of work has begun to draw on Goffman (1967) in relation to radio, although mainly commercial radio. Stiernstedt (2014) discusses the political economy of the radio personality. The author recognises that much media talk by presenters centres on the imaginary transition between frontstage and backstage, and is a medley of presenters as their true selves, and their media personalities. Stiernstedt (2014) draws on Goffman (1967) to argue that communication between presenters is organised and structured and playfully threatens to unveil the truth behind the performed persona. Rampton (2009) discusses notions of performance in relation to radio-microphone recordings of spontaneous interaction amongst adolescents. Rampton (2009) recognises instances of Goffman's (1967) idea of 'interaction ritual'; when an individual offers a positive self-image of himself/herself to others, the individual desires to maintain that image. Contradiction in how an individual projects himself/herself in society risks embarrassment; individuals therefore remain guarded to ensure that they do not present themselves unfavourably (Goffman, 1967). With the exceptions of Stiernstedt's (2014) and Rampton's (2009) work, notions of performance have been excluded from discussions of radio, and more precisely community radio.

Butler's (1993; 1997) work can also add value to discussions of voice on the airwaves. Butler (1993) recasts performativity as linguistic and somatic. Performative acts are forms of authoritative speech; most performative acts are statements that perform a certain action and exercise a binding power (Butler, 1993). Particularly interesting is Butler's (1997) later work on how assaultive speech can produce victimising effects. Butler (1997) shows that the speech act is performed (as theatrical, presented to an audience and subject to interpretation), and linguistic (inducing a set of effects through its implied relation to linguistic conventions). That is, speech is a bodily act with specific linguistic consequences. Certain instances of hate speech interpret the receiver as muted by the effects of injurious speech. This raises concerns about which words wound and which representations offend (Butler, 1997). Through Butler's (1997, 9) work, there is a sense in which the body is threatened through modes of address. The notion that speech wounds relies on the inseparable and incongruous relation between body and speech; the force of the speech act is related to the body whose force is deflected and conveyed through speech. For Butler (1997), efforts to establish the wounding power of certain words depends on who is interpreting the words and what they perform.

A further argument posed by Butler (1997) concerns censorship as the restriction of speech. Butler (1997) distinguishes between two types of censorship. In the conventional view, censorship follows the utterance of offensive speech: speech has already become offensive, and then some recourse of regulatory agency is made. Butler (1997) presents the second view as censorship that precedes the text, and thus is responsible for its production. The subject makes his/her decision regarding speech content and delivery 'in the context of an already circumscribed field of linguistic possibilities' (Butler, 1997, 129). Thus, for Butler (1997), censorship is a productive form of power; it is not only privative, but formative too. I position work on performance from Goffman (1959; 1967; 1981) and Butler (1993; 1997) as useful in addressing some of the problems I have identified concerning work on youth voice and

community radio. This work is helpful in offering a more nuanced understanding of the ideas of 'authentic' voice and of the multiplicity, and sometimes conflictual, nature of voice.

Methodology

This paper emerges from a wider project which used mixed methods, employed through a participatory design. A range of methods were drawn on, namely: 18 months of participation observation at KCC Live; interviews with management at KCC Live and Knowsley Community College; interviews and focus groups with volunteers; a listener survey; listener diaries, and follow up interviews. The data drawn on within this paper emerged predominantly from interviews and focus groups, so I devote attention to those here.

Considering in-depth interviews as personal and intimate encounters (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006), I used them as a window to the stories of participants (Rabionet, 2011). The interviews were useful for eliciting information regarding the attitudes, acuties and perceptions towards the station. I conducted more than 90 semi-structured interviews with volunteers at KCC Live, and six semi-structured interviews with stakeholders, including: station management and management from Knowsley Community College. Interviews typically lasted between one and one and a half hours. The interviews functioned as a pocket of participation (Franks, 2011), as young people were involved in designing interview questions for management. This took the form of mental mapping sessions whereby volunteers came up with a series of questions that they thought would be suitable to ask, with the research objectives in mind.

Two focus group sessions were held, containing seven participants. Each focus group lasted approximately one hour. Focus groups, characterised by interaction (Smithson, 2000), have been positioned as valuable in eliciting the views and experiences of young people (Morgan et

al. 2002). Focus groups were used to foster group discussions surrounding issues that had surfaced during individual interviews and observations. This is important as ‘we are none of us self-contained, isolated, static entities; we are part of complex and overlapping social, familial and collegiate networks’ (Kitzinger, 1994:117). After a peer-led dimension naturally emerged during the first focus group, I trained the young people through informal role-play in asking questions to elicit rich data and in effective listening. Many of the young people already possessed skills in posing questions and listening, owing to their experience of interviewing music artists. Following Murray (2006), I believe the peer-led dimension to the second focus group helped to remove the power differential between the researcher and the researched.

I allowed volunteers to choose their own pseudonyms. Many KCC Live volunteers chose pseudonyms after pop stars, DJs, and presenters. After a group discussion prompted one volunteer to suggest this, other volunteers proceeded to select aliases from their celebrity idols. Station and college management wished to use their genuine names; I therefore permitted them to review their interview transcripts and to request the deletion of content.

Performing youth voice

When examining young people’s involvement in media projects, the notion of youth voice is often sensationalised as connoting free expression and social critique (Soep, 2006). Soep (2006) cautions that, often, there are conflicting voices and interests existing within youth media outcomes. For some young people at KCC Live, such conflicting voices can be a restriction to fully realising their own voices.

Radio voices: restrictions

‘Radio voice’ was a phrase used by one volunteer, Fearne, to explain her on-air voice, which she describes as different from her everyday voice:

Fearne: The only difficulties I've faced is getting into like doing me show properly and like doing me voices and things

CW²: What do you mean by your 'voices'?

Fearne: When I say me voices I mean, like I couldn't just go on air and speak like this, it has to sound right, it has to sound professional and radio-ish, I don't just want to sound like me. Well I want to sound like me, but a better sort of crafted version of me. I have me voice and then I have me radio voice

(Fearne, 22, interview)

For some young people speaking on air is not a simple case of stepping up to the microphone and talking. Fearne rehearses her voice to make it sound 'radio-ish'. In this sense, Fearne is concerned with 'speech production' (Goffman, 1981, 218), in that she is taking steps towards producing 'spontaneous' and fluent speech. Other volunteers, though referring to a more sanitised voice, discussed this notion of a 'crafted version' of self:

When you work on radio, you have your like on-air self and you have your self outside it. So I eff and blind a lot more in person than I would on the radio obviously [laughs]. You've got to project like a more polite version of yourself on there

(Harry, 22, interview)

In training I was taught like the presenting side of things, like erm how to present, like practicing links, what kind of stuff to put in the links, how to erm get them nice and snappy and not mess up, and then obviously all Ofcom training³, erm don't swear, don't say anything offensive, practically don't have an opinion on anything, things like that

² CW denotes my initials.

³ KCC Live holds compulsory training for new volunteers that covers the basics of presenting techniques, for instance use of equipment and awareness of The Ofcom Broadcasting Code.

(Shaz, 18, interview)

It's like your telephone voice isn't it, sometimes if I'm conscious of it I do try to self-censor what I say

(Madonna, 18, focus group)

Harry's discussion of how he 'eff[s] and blind[s] a lot more in person' than on the radio relates to Goffman's (1981) assertion that presenters desire to project the best versions of themselves; to this end, their performances are heedful and self-conscious. Harry perceives the elimination of bad language as a form of censorship. Shaz takes this a step further, in saying that, due to Ofcom regulations, not only is she not allowed to use swear language, but she does not feel that she can have an opinion 'on anything'. As such, the young people can be seen to work with a pre-censored idea of speech; they make decisions about what they will say in the context of 'an already circumscribed field of linguistic possibilities' (Butler, 1997, 129). This can also be seen through Madonna's account of how she conducts self-censorship on air, comparing the projection of herself on the airwaves to a 'telephone voice', which is typically considered polite and professional. Madonna has implemented a technique of self-control to ensure that she does not go against the regulations. Beyond self-control, the young people contend with censorship that *precedes* speech, and is therefore responsible for its production (Butler, 1997). Thus, further than erecting boundaries for expression, censorship is formative of the young people's speech. This supports Arnot and Reay's (2007, 311) notion of 'pedagogic voice', which engages with power relations that produce and shape voices.

Management at Knowsley Community College spoke of their perceived duty to 'veto' what young people had to say, and to 'police' the station:

You might get a bigoted person who might want to muscle in and, erm, have their opinions voiced that are perhaps not of the sort of opinions you would normally like. The trouble with radio of course is, is that you've got to be seen to be fair, and you've got to be seen to be letting everybody have their say. But when you've got erm, responsibilities for students and their wellbeing and what have you, you have to be careful. So, sometimes it's a question of perhaps having to veto what some people would like to say

(Pam, 68, former Vice Principal of Knowsley Community College, interview)

There was always a risk that, erm, you know, you put together young people, particularly sort of the teenage-type person on a public broadcast medium like that and you've got a risk of what they might say...So it was my duty to police it in that sense

(Frank, 63, former Principal of Knowsley Community College, interview)

Although these examples of 'policing' may not sound unreasonable, they demonstrate tensions surrounding the co-construction of youth voice (see Komulainen, 2007); that is, voice as a product of a variety of influences arising from the context within which it is produced. My findings therefore indicate a shift from celebratory accounts of authentic youth voice, to what Podkalicka and Thomas (2010, 403) describe as a 'socially embedded and crafted' voice.

Throughout my fieldwork, there were occasions when young people desired to speak about a topic on air, but were 'scared to even mention it' (Fearne, 22, in Author's field diary 03/12/13) through fear of reprimand if they were to 'say something wrong' (Olly, 17, in Author's field diary 16/07/14). The following anecdotes from Harry and Olly reveal how different spaces at KCC Live permit certain behaviours and voices:

In the office we all laugh and joke, we play fight, call each other names. Take the mick out of where we're from, like Andy lives in Birkenhead so I call him a Wool. I wouldn't do that on air because listeners who like aren't from Liverpool specifically, who are like maybe from over the water [Wirral] or St. Helens [a town in Merseyside] might get offended. Also like I could be swearing me head off saying to Chris 'fuck off you divvy', and then two seconds later I'm in the studio and I don't curse for two hours

(Harry, 22, interview)

I can remember this one time, I was in Studio 2, I was doing a show but we weren't on air, a song was playing out. So I was having a massive rant to Karl about something, probably my job, and I was saying 'fuck this, fuck that' and then suddenly I had a horrible feeling that the mics [microphones] were up. I looked over, I was so panicked my heart like sank. Thankfully they weren't up, if they were I'd have been in so much trouble. Now I try not to say anything remotely controversial when I'm in the studio, regardless of whether we're on or off air. That's what we're advised as well [by management]. I mean it's not worth it, the station would go under

(Olly, 17, interview)

Harry and Olly's narratives represent how at KCC Live there is an informal/backstage behaviour and a different behaviour for performance (Goffman, 1959). Goffman (1959) tells how backstage behaviour can comprise of: bad language; sexual remarks; playful aggressiveness; and joking, amongst other acts. In contrast, the frontstage - at KCC Live being on air - forbids such behaviour. Whilst Goffman (1959, 115) notes that the back region of a performance is 'cut off from it by a partition and guarded passageway', the back region for KCC Live is when the microphones are down. Seen in this way, in the flick of a switch the young people embody a different persona; this is reminiscent of a 'quick-change' act, in which a performer changes swiftly from one costume into another.

During my fieldwork, on the 8th April 2013, Margaret Thatcher died. Many young people at KCC Live felt passionately about her death. However, they communicated that, although they desired to speak about it on air, they feared that they would put the survival of the station in jeopardy through saying something libellous (if a station breaches an Ofcom regulation they may face a heavy fine – something which KCC Live cannot afford to pay):

Today there was plenty of talk about the death of Margaret Thatcher, many of the young people expressed strong opinions about her. Harry referred to Thatcher as ‘the milk snatcher⁴’ and spoke about the decision to end free school milk, whilst Bruce spoke about ‘Thatcherism’ and how he believed that Margaret Thatcher’s battle against inflation led to mass unemployment. When Harry and Bruce went on air, separately, neither of them mentioned Margaret Thatcher at all. When I asked them about this later they said they ‘daren’t’ (Harry), and that ‘it’s safer not to’ (Bruce)

(Author’s field diary, 08/04/13)

My field diary reflects how in the office where presenters wait and socialise before they go before on air, they discussed at length their opinions of Margaret Thatcher and their feelings towards her death. However, these opinions did not feature in young people’s on-air discussions. In this sense, off air at KCC Live is the back region, where the performer can drop his/her front and ‘step out of character’ (Goffman, 1959, 115). Backstage provided an arena for young people to express their true opinions on Thatcher’s death, whilst frontstage (on air), they projected themselves as largely apolitical. This is particularly worrying when considering concerns within children’s geographies and youth studies (e.g. Henn and Foard, 2014) of declining levels of political participation among young people.

⁴ During the Thatcher era, the 1980 Education Act removed the obligation of local education authorities to provide school meals, except for those children entitled to free school meals. Nutritional standards were removed along with the obligation to charge a fixed price for school meals, and free school milk was abolished (Pike and Colquhoun, 2012).

Performance and creative storytelling

Despite the potentially limiting power of community radio, due to Ofcom regulations and the control of station and college management, I found evidence that KCC Live affords creativity to young people. This relates to Nayak and Kehily's (2013) discussion of how children and young people creatively play and open up new spaces for dialogue with media formats, notwithstanding the restricted nature of some of these texts. As Butler (1997, 140) finds, censorship is 'not a dead-end for agency', as there remains the possibility to create a new language that is not condemned by presuppositions. Presenters explore various possibilities and outcomes in the construction of different identities and narratives on air. As Hywel comments:

When you do a radio show, you really have to try and figure out what character - what are your strengths, when are you the most interesting and funny and entertaining to people. And you have to think of a way of packaging that, of putting that across.

(Hywel, 34, consultant to KCC Live, interview)

Hywel's comment that young people 'package' the most interesting, comedic, and entertaining aspects of their personality, relates to Goffman's (1959) discussion of the role of outward performance in communicating impressions of self. I found that young people's performance personae were often exaggerated and caricatured, and they shaped and shared stories around this. I term these stories 'creative audiobiographies', whereby young people move from autobiography to combine music and whimsical self-narrative.

Perhaps the most telling example of a creative audiobiography comes from Chris, who formulated a tale of how he longed to get back into a relationship with his ex-girlfriend. This story unfolded over several months as Chris told listeners that he had been romantically

reacquainted with his girlfriend, and eventually that he desired to end this relationship because he had fallen in love with another girl. Chris told me why he fabricated this story:

To begin with it was just like a, erm, a filler, something to take up space on air. But then, like, I really got into it. I could visualise the characters, I kinda like knew what these girls looked like. I had names for them and stuff. In the end I carried on because I knew, like, the audience would find it funny and stuff...It was weird how much I got into it, I got into character too, I pretended to be upset because of things that this fake girlfriend had done, and I knew that, like, listeners could relate to that and empathise

(Chris, 18, interview)

Whilst other research positions lies and fantasies appearing in research accounts as being of no value (e.g. Veale, 2005), in line with von Benzon (2015, 336), I did not perceive such stories as ‘fraudulent research contributions’, I considered them rich data. One reading of this is that Chris is seeking self-hood, in a bid to negotiate his positioning in the world. Here, a point made by Alrutz (2015), in relation to drama, rings true: in exploring and essentially ‘trying on’ possible selves, young people can relive and rewrite their experiences. An alternative reading is that Chris is attempting to negotiate the way he is perceived by the listening community. This latter reading can be understood in relation to Goffman’s (1959, 203) discussion of ‘impression management’, whereby an individual works to stage a character to be received in a particular way, by a particular group of people. Chris’ tale can also be viewed through the lens of play (testing boundaries and exploring risk, McKendrick et al., 2014), or more specifically pretend play (the use of fantasy and make-believe, Russ, 2004). In this pretend play, Chris uses fantasy to weave a context, story, and characters. Thus, although pretend play is thought to be a childhood activity, this account supports Göncü and Perone’s (2005, 137) argument that it is a ‘life-span activity’, present in ‘youthhood’ as well as childhood.

As is clear then, creative engagement with popular culture, in this instance community radio, affords young people the ability to shape language, style and self into something novel (Carlson and Dimitriadis, 2003). As a result, they believe that they can control their self-representations and cultural identities. The act of constructing creative audiobiographies was not unique to Chris; other young people described how they made up imaginative tales on air:

If it gets to a point where I like, don't know what to say, then I will just make it up. Sometimes that's the best part, the most fun. Because, say I invent this mad story, then I get carried away with it. I add to that story over the next hour or so, and then towards the end of the show, I have to kind of remind myself that it didn't happen [laughs], I made it up

(Andy, 23, interview)

I just tell weird anecdotes to be honest... I do this thing at the end of my show, a bedtime story. I make up the plots, characters, props, I get other volunteers involved in the storytelling too...It's kind of weird [in the studio] because I'm by myself, so it kind of teaches you to just soliloquy for two hours. It's quite strange but, it's weird you just have to get animated even though there's no one there to bounce off or anything. I mean, I dunno, yeah just if there's something in my mind I'll say it, half the time it's not true, like something hasn't happened but I pretend that it has

(Shaz, 18, interview)

These vignettes signal a performative and playful notion of youth voice. Andy's discussion of how it is 'fun' to make up stories on air coheres with Goffman's (1959) assertion that, when individuals are consumed by their own act, they become their own audience, and as such, they are the performer and spectator of the same performance. Interestingly, although Shaz speaks

of her time in the studio as an individual experience, she discusses storytelling in an inclusionary way, through involving other volunteers. The young people can be seen to engage in ‘shared pretense’ (Searle, 1979, 71) in the respect that other young people are ‘in on it’; they are aware of the play-acting. Further, Andy and Shaz are constructing ‘agentive selves’ (Hull and Katz, 2006, 43), as producers of their own stories. These quotations can be understood as a certain kind of performance, namely improvisational theatre (Improv) which, following Napier (2004, 140), involves ‘getting on a stage and making stuff up as you go along’. As Göncü and Perone’s (2005) tell, Improv can be likened to children’s play because of its lack of emphasis on performance rules or structures. Here then, the young people appear to be finding their own ways of combating the restrictive nature of broadcasting regulations. These experimental presentations of voice add credence to the view that caution needs to be exercised in considering youth voice as authentic (see Cairns, 2009; Soep and Chávez, 2010). By connoting the real and the actual, romanticised notions of voice preclude any performative aspect. I argue that this is troublesome, underestimating the value of constructing a creative self.

I found a further incarnation of performativity within ‘fake interactions’ that presenters read out on air. When presenters ask listeners to ‘get in touch’ during their show, they put this request on KCC Live’s social media pages. However, presenters seldom receive response from the listening audience. Aware of this, some presenters prepare fake interactions in advance of their shows, whilst others, as Andy (24, interview) tells, ‘ad-lib’. The young people spoke of how there was a skill to creating fake interactions:

First of all you’ve got to think about the person’s name, like this area, around here there wouldn’t be anyone called err Jemima or Hugo [laughs], so err I always use more common names like Jake, Dan and Emma

(Chris, 17, focus group)

It's all about the delivery, you've got to say it convincingly, you can't just say 'Scott from Huyton messaged', you've got to say 'Big up Scott from Huyton, getting in touch by Facebook today, he's off to the movies tonight'. You've got to make it into a story

(Modest Mouse, 28, interview)

From the above, I tease out two key themes: script writing, and performance. With regards to script writing, Chris speaks of how, in the selection of names for the fictional characters he 'casts', he deliberately chooses 'more common names', which he deems in keeping with the area. Regarding performance, Modest Mouse tells how he convincingly delivers his interactions, to disguise them as counterfeit. These fake interactions are 'stage props' in the frontstage (Goffman, 1959, 32), utilised by the young people as part of their performances.

Another instance of performance occurred one evening, when I was involved in a KCC Live talk show. Andy chose news stories for other volunteers and I to discuss. One story was that researchers had found a new way to 'stamp out smoking'. Whilst a song was playing out, Madonna and Robbie spoke about which side of the argument they would take. Robbie said: 'can you pretend you're really in support of it, and I'll say I'm really against it'. Madonna said: 'okay, okay, anything for a bit of a heated debate!' (Author's field diary, 24/04/14). The debate that ensued did get heated, so much so that the Station Manager stepped in and asked someone else to take over the microphone. The Station Manager believed that the argument sounded aggressive, and was worried that listeners would consider the content to be unfriendly. Robbie revealed to the Station Manager that it was not a genuine argument; rather, they were performing. This can be seen as a 'cartooning sequence' (Coupland, 2001, 367), whereby voices and stances should not be taken at face value, for it is performance talk. I conducted a joint interview with Madonna and Robbie after this incident to find out their motivations for enacting this performance:

Madonna: When you're sort of adopting an opinion to kind of make a superficial debate, erm, you're doing it to make it more interesting for the audience...It sounds boring when you're all agreeing and it's like 'yeah yeah, good point good point, move on!'...It makes listeners want to tune in and it sort of gets them riled up as well, because like, you know, the more heated the debate the more heated they get and their opinion is

Robbie: You've got to create a debate sometimes, cos a lot of the time we'll have topics and we all sort of like agree on it, like 'oh that's awful, that's awful'. But, beforehand we have to say 'well can you disagree'...If we all agreed then listeners could just go 'oh yeah, yeah that's right'. But if you have someone else's opinion, and to see the other side of the argument...well it makes people think 'oh yeah that actually might, they might have a point there'.

(Madonna, 18, and Robbie, 26, joint interview)

Madonna and Robbie's conversation maps nicely onto ideas generated by Goffman (1959, 28), that an individual puts on his/her show 'for the benefit of other people', and that Madonna and Robbie conduct themselves in a certain way to evoke a desired response from the audience. This relates to Soep's (2006) argument that young people may control, exaggerate and try out a range of real and imagined voices. Taking this point further, with limited feedback of listeners on social media, it could be questioned whether the young people are largely performing an imagined voice to an imagined audience. Heard in this way, owing to community radio's imaginative force, it is an important space of performance, experimentation and creative storytelling. This has parallels with Stiernstedt's (2014, 297) point that there is a common expectation amongst radio audiences that presenters are performing, and that these performances are 'scripted, edited, and to a certain extent "fake"'.

Conclusion

This paper has used the case study of community radio station KCC Live to make a series of broad conceptual arguments about youth voice. First, this paper has shown that performance is important in several ways. I showed how young people at KCC Live perform more sanitised versions of themselves on air. This ranged from young people not using swear language, through to the belief that they cannot express their opinions on air. Further, my discussion of how station management, college management, and the regulatory body Ofcom ‘police’ the airwaves extends Komulainen’s (2007) theorising of youth voice as co-constructed, and adds weight to the notion of voice as socially determined, and a product of the context within which it is produced. My research therefore extends Goffman’s (1981) conceptualisation of radio presenters as delivering heedful performances, to show how presenter’s performances are not only self-censored, but also pre-censored (Butler, 1997). Speech, here, is performed in ‘an already circumscribed field of linguistic possibilities’ (Butler, 1997:129), supporting Arnot and Reay’s (2007:311) notion of ‘pedagogic voice’, which engages with power relations that produce and shape voices.

Second, my findings reveal that, through performance, some young people at KCC Live use the airwaves to create a new language that is not condemned by presuppositions (Butler, 1997). This includes producing ‘creative audiobiographies’, fake interactions and crafted debates. I therefore offer an important contribution to children’s geographies in finding that pretend play, characterised by performance, has the potential to become a ‘life-span activity’ (Göncü and Perone’s, 2005:137), not an activity confined to childhood. My research therefore adds credence to the view advanced by scholars to be cautious about understandings of voice that claim authenticity (Cairns, 2009; Soep, 2006). By connoting the real and the actual, romanticised notions of youth voice preclude performance, play and creativity. This is

troublesome, underestimating the value of constructing a creative self, and of young people re-writing the present and imagining their futures through storytelling. The key contribution of this paper, therefore, is that it provides empirical evidence which goes *beyond* previous simplistic conceptualisations of voice (see Soep's 2006 call) in youth media production.

Overall, I have provided insight into a twofold vision of youth voice on the airwaves as both restrictive and performative concurrently. Those who have considered performance in relation to radio have been concerned with unveiling the truth behind the performed persona and the resultant embarrassment (Stiernstedt, 2014), as opposed to the positive potential of on-air performances. Engaging with performance, more liberally, in the study of radio thus enables insight into the ways in which performance is not just an act of refinement and sanitisation, but also an act of exaggeration and caricature.

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