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Article

Going 'Backstage': Observant Participation in Research with Young People

Catherine Wilkinson, Edge Hill University, Faculty of Health and Social Care

Wilkinsc@edgehill.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper reflects on fieldwork undertaken at youth-led community radio station, KCC Live. It draws on Goffman to elucidate the differences between front and backstage spaces at KCC Live, and provides snapshots from research encounters to illustrate the importance of observant participation (over participant observation) in permitting access to these spaces. This paper celebrates the embeddedness of the researcher as a member of the community under study. In doing so, it argues that immersion in community research settings can enable insight into the functioning, relationships, rules and peculiarities of the place and people, all of which are fundamental to ethnographic research.

Introduction

In 2007, Brian Moeran wrote a chapter, *From Participant Observation to Observant Participation*, positioning 'observant participation' as superior to 'participant observation' in organisational ethnography. For me this chapter was thought-provoking and (as I struggled to label my heavily immersed positioning in my doctoral research) I came to adopt this term. It is the shift from participant observation to observant participation that enables the fieldworker to move from frontstage to backstage, and thereby to gain knowledge that is available only to insiders (Moeran, 2007). In this paper, I draw on my Ph.D. research, a CASE studentship researching into/with young people at a community radio station. In this project I aimed to gain insight into the ways young people use community radio as a platform to find and realise their voices, build stocks of social capital, and create their own communities and senses of belonging. I was based at my CASE partner, community radio station KCC Live, for 18 months. I intended my methodology to include participant observation, interviews and focus groups with staff and volunteers. I had read that participant observation enables researchers to gain an understanding of the richness and complexity of the lived experience of a community

under study (e.g. Herbert 2000). However, as I became embedded in the practices, politics and personalities of KCC Live, I found the term participant observation unsatisfactory, believing that it did not capture my very 'embeddedness'. I frame my discussion herein with Goffman's (1981) distinction between frontstage and backstage spaces, and tease out this debate using three snapshots from seemingly insignificant encounters from my research. I further Moeran's (2007) discussion of observant participation as a rite of passage in organisational ethnography, affecting the quality of information given and later analysed, to provide an example of a community setting, and research with young people. Beyond this, this paper contributes to debates in human geography (Gregson and Rose 2000) in arguing that spaces need to be thought of as performative, and presents observant participation as a methodological technique through which to explore this.

First, I provide an overview of KCC Live. Then I draw on Goffman (1959) to elucidate the differences between front and backstage spaces. From this, I discuss how I went about my observant participation at KCC Live. I introduce three snapshots from encounters in my research as examples of the importance of observant participation. Finally, I draw this paper to a conclusion, reflecting on the value of observant participation to understand the performance of people and place.

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 (NEET) to enter/re-enter the labour market, though not all volunteers are NEET. The station typically has a 14-25 year-old volunteer base (KCC Live 2007). At the time of conducting this research all volunteers were aged over 16 and a number were aged over 25.

When first set up, KCC Live had three full-time staff positions, Programme Controller, Station Co-ordinator, and Community Liaison Co-ordinator. Due to staffing cost reductions in the college, this dipped from three to two and then one during the course of this research project. As a 'youth-led' radio station, unpaid volunteers from the college and the community assume the role of presenters, producers, newsreaders, copywriters, segue-technicians, jingle

producers, 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[1] awarded KCC Live a five-year licence to broadcast on 99.8FM; this licence was extended for 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 now 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 has four key aims: encourage the positive self-image of young people; 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. The station's target audience is 10-24 year-olds in the centre of the borough (KCC Live 2007). KCC Live positions itself as an "exciting, non-elitist, highly-varied radio" (KCC Live 2007, 4), which values and explores young people's musical tastes, opinions and daily lives, in ways that are relevant to them. I joined KCC Live as a young person (22 years old when I joined the station), who was a habitual radio listener (predominantly commercial radio), and enjoyed listening to music including rap and R&B. I was interested to know what went on behind the scenes during the seemingly seamless radio presentations that I was familiar with.

Frontstage versus Backstage

Goffman discusses performance in relation to the competence and incompetence of radio presenters' on air delivery. Goffman (1959, 109, 114) uses the term "front region" to describe the place in which a performance is delivered, and "back region" or "backstage" to describe where the performer drops his/her front and offers a more 'authentic' act. Backstage is typically inaccessible to audience members. In radio, backstage is defined by all places out of range of 'live' microphones (Goffman, 1959). Frontstage, radio presenters are careful to "put their best foot forward"; their on-air performances are wary and self-conscious (Goffman 1981, 198). Radio presenters work to produce speech that is fluent and spontaneous; faults reflect speech production problems, and speech production is not homogenous (Goffman 1981). Radio presenters are focussed on the seamless delivery of scripts and are intended to be a "perfect speech machine" (Goffman, 1981, 223). Although ordinary talk is full of technical faults that

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[1] The communications regulator in the UK.

go unnoticed, broadcasters are schooled to realise cultural stereotypes about speech production; namely that it should be "without influencies, slips, boners, and gaffes, i.e. unfaultable" (Goffman 1981, 240). Goffman (1981) maintains that when performance obligations are satisfied, the presenter is projecting an image of him/herself as a competent professional.

A small body of work has begun to draw on Goffman (1967) in relation to radio, although notably commercial radio. Stiernstedt (2014) recognises that much 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 the communication between presenters and DJs 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 him/herself to others, the individual desires to maintain that image. Contradiction in how an individual projects him/herself in society risks embarrassment. Individuals therefore remain guarded, to ensure that they do not expose themselves unfavourably (Goffman 1967). This paper supports Moeran's (2007) argument that the move from frontstage to backstage is an important one in fieldwork, using the example of a community-based ethnography.

Observant Participation at KCC Live

I joined KCC Live in March 2012, and attended the station one day per week for two months. This scoping period was important as a process of acculturation (see Leyshon 2002), enabling me to establish rapport with staff and volunteers, and familiarise myself with the station's protocols and values. After this period, I attended the station on average four days per week, between the hours of 8am and 8pm. Throughout this time, I divided - with some difficulty - my presence between the studio, green room[2] and staff office. However, my observations were not restricted to the station. I also participated in fundraising activities, such as supermarket bag packing events and a twelve-hour bowling event, training sessions, charity events and community media events. I accepted invitations to attend Liverpool International Music Festival with a volunteer, and Parklife Festival in Manchester with the Station Manager.

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[2] A room in a theatre or studio in which performers can relax when they are not performing.

I undertook (what I came to understand to be, having read Moeran's 2007 chapter) observant participation at KCC Live for 18 months, and overtly observed the multi-layered everyday lifeworlds (see Habermas 1987) of volunteers and staff. My decision to use the term 'observant participation' over 'participant observation' is due to how much weight I gave to each role, that is 'participant' and 'observer'. Monti (1992) notes that, in any fieldwork, there is a battle between these roles, and though there is no written rule, the role of observer should take precedence. Whilst I observed, I intentionally positioned myself as much more of a participant. To ensure my participation was equal to that of other volunteers, I completed broadcast training, internally at KCC Live and externally with the National Broadcasting School at Liverpool-based commercial station Radio City. In Dunbar-Hester's (2008, 212) study of 'Geek Group', a group of individuals who build radio hardware, the researcher notes that it was a "hindrance" that she was "not more versed in the skills of the group", believing that if she possessed such skills she could have contributed to projects more fully. By ensuring technical ability, I was making possible my active participation at KCC Live; this quickly led to me co-presenting a weekly show, and eventually presenting my own four-hour weekly show. This was beneficial in gaining 'insider knowledge' and learning the 'tricks of the trade'. I thus join Moeran (2007) in positioning observant participation as marking an important rite of passage in fieldwork, affecting the richness of data I was able to gather[3].

I recorded thoughts, feelings and casual interactions through written anecdotes in a research diary (Dewalt and Dewalt 2002). At the beginning of my fieldwork, I went about my daily routine in anticipation of major events arising. On certain days or weeks, nothing 'big' seemed to occur. I realised that what I was participating in/observing was naturally occurring and that the ordinariness (Seigworth 2000) and banal, everyday geographies (Horton and Kraftl 2005), was precisely what I should be documenting through ethnographic accounts. I paid close attention to the taken-for-granted everyday practices of young people at KCC Live, reflecting upon "things that are actually *done* with, and in relation to, popular cultural *stuff*" (Horton, 2014, 733, emphasis in original). My diary contained subjective accounts that I reflected upon periodically. Just like Constable (2013, 117) I had "favourite nuggets" of data, considering these "gift-materials" entrusted to me by participants. I provide three snapshots from my fieldwork to reveal how my observant participant stance was important for data gathering.

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[3] Moeran (2007) points out that the ability to move backstage is dependent partly on the personality of the researcher (see Wilkinson 2016 for a reflection on my personality in this research setting).

Snapshot 1: Chris' girlfriend

Chris[4], a KCC Live volunteer, formulated a tale on air of how he was longing to get back into a relationship with his ex-girlfriend. This story unfolded over several months as Chris told the listeners that while he had been romantically reacquainted with his girlfriend, he now desired to end this relationship because he had fallen in love with another girl. In telling how a digital story can be understood as a space in which, through finding and creating useful objects, the storyteller endangers their association with the world, Brushwood Rose (2009, 17) argues that the researcher must never ask "is this the truth, or did you make it up?" However, my role as observant participant enabled me to determine that this story was fabricated, without having to ask. Instead, my conversations with Chris centred on 'why' he had invented this tale:

> 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…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 can be understood as "impression management", whereby an individual works to stage a character to be received in a particular way, by a particular group of people (Goffman 1959, 203). In this scenario, my role as an observant participant enabled me to "separate fact from fiction and gossip from information, whilst strategically using both to gain further data" (Moeran 2007, 148). Had I not been so embedded in the research setting, I may have taken Chris' story at face value, and missed a wealth of data which became integral to my doctoral

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[4] I allowed young people to choose their own pseudonyms. Many chose pseudonyms after pop stars, DJs, and presenters.

research in relation to pretend play (play that includes the use of fantasy and make-believe, Russ, 2004). Thus, through observant participation, the validity of the data I gathered increased, as I was able to avoid questions such as: is this participant telling me what he really does in a particular situation, or what he should be doing? (see Moeran 2007), instead concentrating on questions of 'why?'.

Snapshot 2: Fake interactions

When presenters ask listeners to 'get in touch' during their shows, they post this request on Facebook and Twitter. However, presenters seldom receive response from the listening audience, due to lack of audience interaction with KCC Live. Aware of this, some presenters prepare fake interactions in advance of their shows, whilst others "ad-lib" (Andy, 24, interview). The young people spoke of how there was a skill to creating fake interactions, suggesting that certain names like "Jemima or Hugo" were not 'fitting', and so they "use more common names", like "Jake, Dan, and Emma" (Chris, 17, focus group). Andy (24, interview) confided in me that he has "a standard few stock characters" which he brings into on air discussions, and he creates activities for these characters, such as painting, shopping, and partying. This was with the intention of making it appear that Andy had 'regular' listeners. For volunteer Modest Mouse (28, interview), the key to successful fake interactions was "the delivery, you've got to say it convincingly".

From the above, I teased out two themes: script writing (selection of names for characters and the activities they were are scripted to do), and performance (delivery). I determined that these fake interactions are "stage props" in the frontstage (Goffman, 1959:32), utilised by the presenters as part of their performances. Had I been listening to KCC Live at home, or sat in the neighbouring green room observing, I would not have gained insight into these backstage conventions and behaviours. As Moeran (2007, 148) states: "your informants realise that you have learned the rules and know the difference between front and backstage games and, as a result, they stop pretending when in your presence, and allow themselves to be seen as they are". That is, through observant participation the young people 'let me in', I learnt the rules regarding fake interactions, and even incorporated them into my show when I presented on air.

Snapshot 3: A crafted debate

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 the microphones were down, Madonna and Robbie spoke about which side of the argument each of us 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 very heated, so much so that Chrissie, the Station Manager, asked someone else to take over the microphone. Robbie revealed to Chrissie 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. Madonna (18, interview) told me that they performed this sequence to "make it more interesting for the audience", whilst Robbie (26, interview) confided that often their on-air debates were shaped by such planned disagreements.

Madonna and Robbie's conversation maps nicely onto Goffman's (1959:28) argument that an individual puts on his/her show "for the benefit of other people", thus Madonna and Robbie conduct themselves in a certain way to evoke a desired response from the audience. Further, it has parallels with Stiernstedt's (2014:297) point that presenters are performing, and that these performances are "scripted, edited, and to a certain extent "fake"". My research therefore revealed that not only is KCC Live a crucial space for the construction of young people's presentations of self, but owing to radio's imaginative force, it is also an important space of performance, creative storytelling and (re)presentation.

The shift from participant observation to observant participation is concerned with the ability to see beyond the social front that participants present to strangers in their everyday lives (Moeran 2007); that is, to know that there is a difference between their frontstage and backstage behaviour (Goffman 1959). Had I been merely observing as opposed to participating, I could have interpreted this as a genuine debate. However, due to my observant participation, I had ready access to both the front and backstage (Moeran, 2007). Not only did I learn that Madonna and Robbie were acting, but I also became a part of the act.

Concluding comments

This short paper has highlighted that, although useful, participant observation by its very nature signals a removed 'observer' role in community-based fieldwork. By contrast, *observant*

participation celebrates the embeddedness of the researcher as a member of the community that he/she is studying. I agree with Moeran (2007) that observant participation should be the ideal to which researchers aspire, where appropriate, when conducting fieldwork. With this paper I argue that immersion in community research settings can enable insight into the functioning, relationships, rules and peculiarities of the place and people, of which are fundamental to ethnographic research.

To recap, the shift from participant observation to observant participation is concerned with the ability to see beyond the social front that informants present to strangers in their everyday lives (Moeran 2007); that is, to know that there is a difference between their frontstage and backstage behaviour (Goffman 1959), and to have ready access to both spaces. In this paper, I reflected on how this enabled me to know whether a young person's delivery on air was a performance. I found that backstage at KCC Live comprises creative storytelling, crafted debates, playful acts, and script writing. Thus, my research stance as an observant participant enabled me to contribute to debates in human geography (Gregson and Rose 2000) to argue that spaces (aside from the people in those spaces) can be performative. With this paper I position observant participation as a methodological lens through which to explore the performativity of spaces in future research, enabling researchers to move beyond "surface appearances" (Moeran 2007, 148), thus facilitating quality data gathering.

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