

Moblogging as method: exploring the role of the mobile phone in accessing personal action and experience

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ABSTRACT

Mobile phones are increasingly being employed as a resource in research for collecting data about participants' experiences and perceptions of their environments. This proposal will outline the author's use of mobile phones in this way as part of the Cityware project (www.cityware.org.uk) and discuss the potential and the challenges that come with the use of moblogging as a research method.

Keywords

Mobile phones, Moblogging, Methodology

1. Moblogging as method

As part of the Cityware project, mobile phones were used as a key means of accessing participants' personal perceptions of their environments. Alongside more traditional environmental psychology methods, including map-sketching, boundary-marking and questionnaires, 22 participants completed 'moblogging tours' of their neighbourhoods and of Bath city-centre. These tours were completed individually, as if showing a friend around. Participants chose their own routes, and documented their experience using a Nokia smartphone. They were asked to document anything significant in the environment – anything that they would normally point out or mention to a friend – using photographs, video, audio and text. In addition to these documents, a GPS trail was recorded.

In order to visualize the tour for analysis and reflection, mashups were created using the Google Earth API. The mashups were made up of a GPS trail, plus icons for each of the four types of document that participants recorded. In this way it was possible to easily construct a narrative of a participant's journey. The mashup made clear when and where each document was created and the relationships between documents (a note attached to a photograph for example).

The moblogging tours offered a number of significant advantages over the more traditional methods employed in the study and methods used in other related work. The self-directed nature of the tours and the immediacy with which participants could document their experience meant that a really rich picture of a relationship with an environment could emerge.

Two further aims of the study, alongside the investigation of participants' perceptions of their environments, were to explore the nature of the moblogging tour as a learning experience and to evaluate moblogging as a research method.

2. Moblogging as a learning experience

Participants' perceptions of their environments were affected in some interesting ways as a result of their engagement with the moblogging activity.

Shape and Size: Perceptions of physical aspects of space were affected. In almost every case, sketch-maps that participants drew of their neighbourhoods after their tours covered a bigger area than those that were drawn before the tours. No participant drew a smaller map after the tour than they did before the tour. In a questionnaire, participants were asked for an explanation for any differences between their two maps. Participants generally ascribed an increase in the scope of their map to their experience on the moblogging tour.

Community: Participants were often more positive about aspects of community in their neighbourhoods after completed the tour. One participant was very negative about her neighbourhood at the beginning of the study, "I don't know what I'm going to do for this tour – there's nothing there – it's horrible". During the tour, many of the documents that this participant created highlighted regeneration and community in the area. Photograph subjects included a community centre, a new retail park and a charity shop that supported local single-parent families. Completing the tour was a very positive experience for this participant – she expressed a more positive attitude towards her environment at the end of the study, apparently as a result of engagement with the moblogging tour.

Aesthetic: In a similar way, many participants were more positive about the aesthetic of their neighbourhoods following the tour. One participant took a number of photographs of views across the countryside. He reported a more positive view of the aesthetic qualities of his neighbourhood at the end of the study compared to the beginning, as a result of the process.

3. Discussion and future work

The dual role of moblogging as described above – as a means of accessing personal perceptions, but also as a means of changing those perceptions – highlights some great potential for the use of moblogging as a research method, but also highlights some interesting challenges. The ability to capture self-directed, immediate, multi-modal evidence of personal experience in mobile, dynamic contexts, must be an important development in methodology.

Planned future work will involve the use of moblogging as method in a variety of contexts, in order to more deeply examine ways in which we can access emerging and perceptions of environments and experience such as those described above.