

FINALIST

Using mobile devices to access the realities of youth

How identification with society influences political engagement

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JUDGES' CITATION

The judges commended the author on a passionate, thoughtful and elegant piece of writing, discussing the pros and cons of the method described in the paper. Despite the small-scale sample, the judges felt that this pilot study provides readers with interesting food for thought on using mobile technology for ethnographic-based research.

THE PAPER

Prologue

This paper is a demonstration of a methodological innovation around mobile technology that I believe has the potential to access the realities of people in a way that many other methodologies do not. While a recent invention within the world of research, I believe that its full potential has yet to be realised and have set out below what I believe to be an exemplary manifestation of its key benefits. This example takes the form of a socio-political demonstration, but hopefully goes to show that other areas of research – consumer, ethnographic and even product testing, to name a few – can reap the rewards on offer here.

Introduction

It has regularly come to my attention that young people in the UK do not always show a great deal of interest in politics. In the last UK general election in 2010, youth turnout was down at 44%. This figure can be compared against 86% for the 65-plus category,¹ something that makes for fairly disappointing reading in a country so proud of its democratic structure.

According to research conducted in recent years, there are many theories as to this lack of engagement, including a growth of individualism and therefore lack of interest in taking part in the community; perceived lack of relevance of political topics; lack of belief that politicians will listen to opinions; and a feeling of powerlessness or inability to influence the political process of the country (see the Appendix). In order to fully understand this, the question must be asked as to whether this trend is unique to the UK, or whether similar patterns exist in diverse political climates.

While many youth in the UK are unwilling to engage with formal political processes (such as elections and party politics), participation has been seen in 'extra-institutional' activities such as

¹ www.ukpolitical.info

protests, occupations, petitions and even riots. As a London resident I watched with interest, and in some cases shock, as certain events over the last couple of years took place. Some had a clear purpose – the student protests about the increase in tuition fees in December 2011 were a clear example of this. Others, although less clear in their objective, were even more shocking to behold – the riots that took place around the country in the summer of 2011, for example (Figure 1) – and although much debate has taken place with regard to their cause, it is worryingly clear that a more deeply entrenched desire to express themselves exists among many UK youth.

So there is a current need to uncover more deeply both the things that young people care about, but also the best channels through which to enable them to express their opinions. Recent events throughout the rest of the world have demonstrated that, in other countries, youth have been engaging with, and changing, the political process – the most obvious being the ‘Arab Spring’. With this in mind, I felt that this was a chance for my methodology to compare and contrast behaviour in the UK with that in other countries, and to learn from experiences and attitudes across the globe.

My methodology therefore aims to offer a fresh insight into the ways in which we can seek to understand motivations and opinions among youth in a set of different countries, as well as the channels that can be used to allow them to express those opinions.

Objectives

- Demonstrate how innovative methodologies can be used to identify topics, or ‘issues’, within the actual reality of lives of young people (18–24) that provide motivation to engage with political discourse.
- Show how these methodologies can provide deeper understanding than traditional methods such as group discussions, interviews and online mass surveys.
- Offer insight into the channels that can be used to enable engagement with political discourse among young people – to understand in what ways they can be engaged.
- Increase understanding all of the above by comparing and contrasting the UK with other political environments of a varying nature, namely China and India.

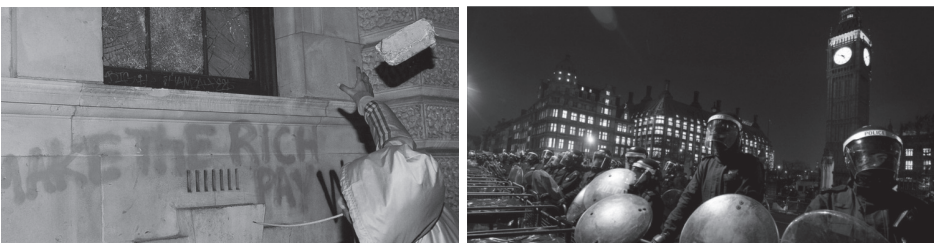


Figure 1 Images of London in December 2011 illustrate the extent to which youth in the UK were willing to go to in order to express their opinion; riot police gather in Westminster (right), while a youth tries to break in to the Treasury by smashing windows (left)

Source: BBC website

My methodology

What and why?

One of the most interesting things about the summer riots and the student occupations in the UK was the way in which they happened. In his recent article, Yannis Theocharis (2012) shows us how mobile connectable devices were used to gather support, coordinate logistics and lend a voice to thousands of young people wishing to express their opinion. BlackBerry™ Messenger was also used to infamous effect in the riots when it provided rioters with a free, 'on the go' communicative tool. This paper plays on these themes and shows how a mobile connectable device can be used to get to the heart of young people's opinions, needs, frustrations and desires.

One methodology to emerge recently at Firefish in conjunction with a number of projects is our Mobile Aquarium™ app. Downloaded by the respondent, it allows them to take pictures, record videos and audio content, as well as write text blogs (all done via their smartphone) before uploading the information to a secure site to be viewed by the researcher. In short, by using this piece of technology, we are therefore able to receive information from respondents, over an extended period of time, as they go about their daily lives. This was crucial in achieving our objective: to find out the types of things that young people wish to express their opinion on in the real world, and in real time.

Ten respondents in each of China, India and the UK were asked to download the app and tasked with telling us about the issues in their lives that they care about and wished to express their opinion on (Figures 2 and 3). They were briefed beforehand and instructions were worded very carefully so

as to leave the scope as wide as possible. Essentially, respondents were asked to carry on with their normal lives and to talk about the things that they felt strongly about over the period of a week. Words like 'politics' were deliberately avoided in order to refrain from leading answers down a particular route. At the end of the week, the respondents were sent more specific questions to answer about their level of political involvement, as well as the channels that they would ideally use to express their opinions. All this was then followed up with a series of depth interviews (mostly conducted via Skype) in order to provide added context.

The benefits

What we ended up with, therefore, was a series of 'sparks' that happened/ occurred to our respondents in three very different political atmospheres, over the course of a week. These sparks, in the form of videos/text blogs/pictures etc., were the issues that they felt strongly about and that, for them, represented 'politics' at some level.

The success of this methodology was therefore strikingly apparent in a number of different ways. Overall, it enabled us to gain a far richer, more accurate set of insights into the lives of our respondents than would otherwise have been possible in focus group or interview situations.

- First, by allowing our respondents to carry on with their normal lives, we achieved a set of results that could be taken in 'real context', rather than in the contrived context of a focus group or interview.
- Second, it avoided the problem of inadequate memory retrieval that can

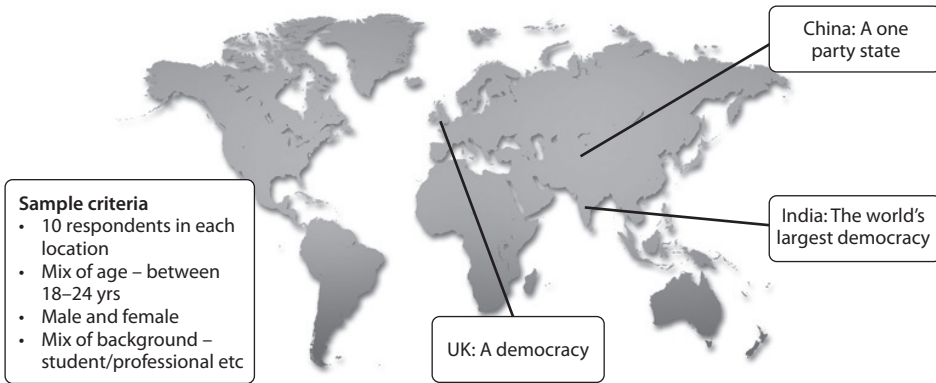


Figure 2 Sample and locations

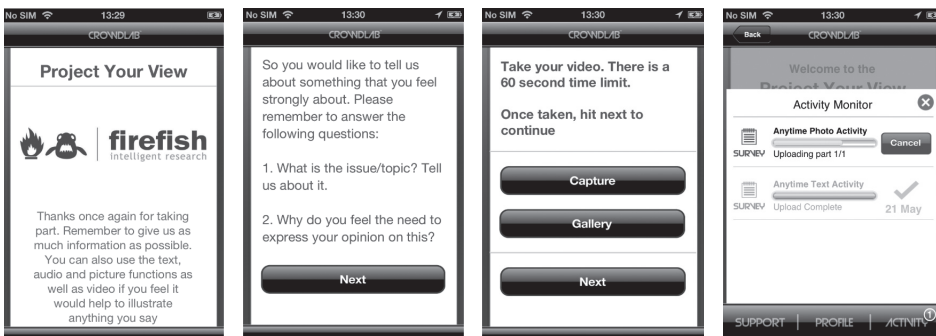


Figure 3 A selection of pages from the app downloaded by respondents

often plague a focus group situation. By giving respondents a week to answer, we refrained from ‘putting them on the spot’ and therefore risking inaccurate and incomplete findings.

- Third, the platform has the potential to put us in touch with a large sample size for a relatively small budget.
- And, last, by allowing our respondents to illustrate their point of view with video/pictorial content, supported by text, we gave them the chance to express themselves in much richer detail than other methods – online surveys, for example. Imagine

the scenario: you’re on the bus home from work reading a newspaper and you see a story that catches your attention because you feel strongly about it. You take out your phone and, as you’re walking to your front door, you record a quick video about your feelings on this topic. Then you press upload!

The findings

A host of individual issues and topics arose as being particularly important to respondents, and there were clear differences between the three locations. Even among a small sample, the benefits of using this technology are clear in that

we are able to gain a real-life perspective of the lives of our respondents. Here follows a summary of the key findings.

China

Several issues came to the fore in China, many of which revolved around the importance placed upon ‘community’ and ‘society’ by young Chinese people, as well as the image projected by that society to the rest of the world. It seems that this has become particularly important within the context of China’s increasingly active role as a political and economic world power. Civilised behaviour on the metro and students not paying attention in class were particularly high on the agenda given their importance as ‘social indicators’. One student I interviewed told me that education was very important for Chinese society as it was the basis for the country’s future welfare, and that all fellow students should therefore make the effort to behave properly when in class;

with China in a state of growth, issues such as this were of key importance to respondents. Others similarly talked about antisocial behaviour on the metro as being an unwanted facet of modern Chinese society.

Other issues – such as territorial sovereignty, corruption and human rights – illustrated the perceived importance of China’s projected image towards the outside world. The territorial dispute over the island of Huangyan was one example of this, the respondent saying that the government should stand up for China. The human rights debacle around Chen Guancheng also featured strongly – something that not only prompts shame on behalf of Chinese society, but also anger at the interference of external powers, namely the US. China’s emerging problems as a growing market were also popular, with the issue of food safety, overcrowding and pollution being talked about by multiple respondents.

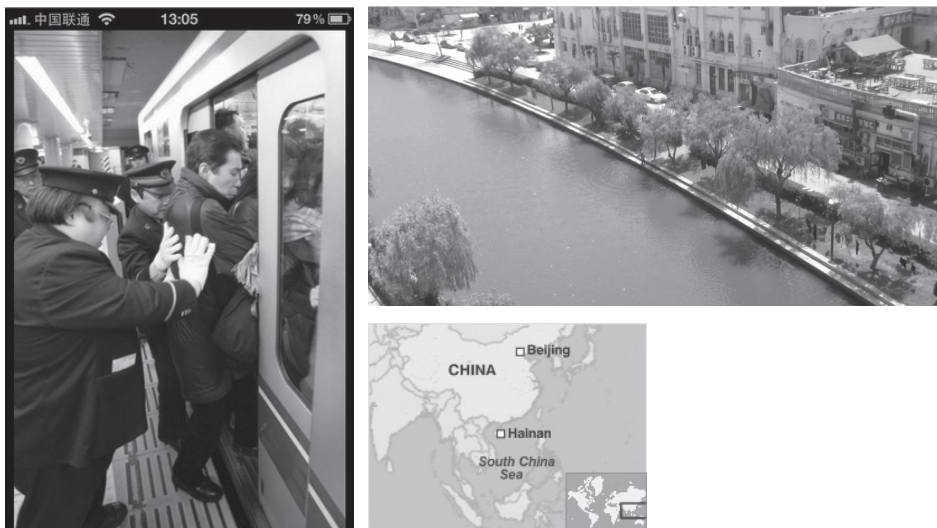


Figure 4 Pictures/videos taken by respondents to show overcrowding and pollution (left and top right); territorial sovereignty (bottom right)

India

In a similar way to China, Indian respondents demonstrated that many of their thoughts can be grounded in the context of the emergence of India's modernisation as a world economic power. Issues that featured strongly were the growth of new markets – such as the SUV automobile industry and western fast food industry – as well as the need for reform of sectors such as education (a key facet of growth).

Interestingly, many respondents talked about the negative side effects of this growth, with issues such as corruption within society (the Jan Lokpal Bill, for example), wealth disparity and pollution taking centre stage. These were the topics that they tended to talk about with conviction, one respondent saying that 'corruption is a big problem facing India ... we should fight against it by not bribing people around us'. Another lamented the fact that it has become 'a social obligation' to overspend on weddings and waste food in order to give an impression of superior wealth.

However, perhaps the most striking set of opinions came in relation to the maltreatment of 'the individual' within Indian society – something that was perhaps less pronounced in China. Child

cruelty and sexual abuse, child labour, women's rights and safety within cities were all key to this. Pictures were taken on construction sites and views were expressed on topics such as 'women empowerment, especially in a country like India where the girl child is still believed to be a burden on the family'.

The UK

In the UK, as demonstrated by our app data, we saw perhaps the most 'individualistic' response out of the three locations. Issues to take centre stage included the prospects of young people trying to find a job, expensive rail travel, the presence of too much unhealthy food available to commuters (when trying to hold down a healthy lifestyle), inconsistent garbage collection from doorsteps and the financial pressure of keeping up with technological advances.

It should probably be noted that this project took place at a time of relative 'calm' in terms of current events – perhaps the most prominent news story being the Leveson Inquiry into press standards. However, UK respondents struggled to voice their opinion on many issues beyond their immediate surroundings, or things that directly affected them. The Euro crisis received



Figure 5 Pictures illustrating a growing economy in India

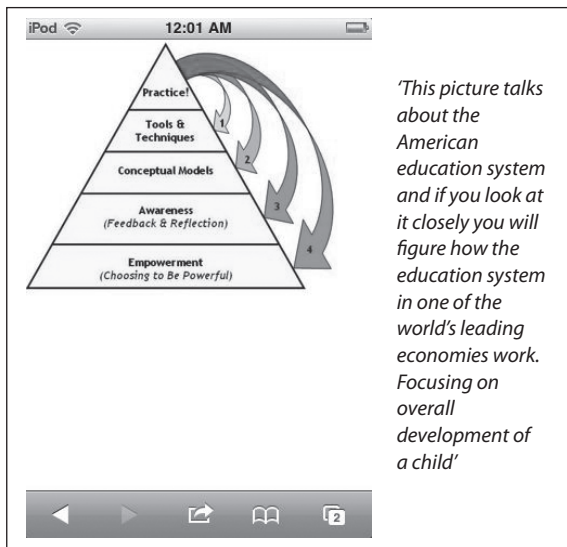


Figure 6 One Indian respondent's entry about education reform (left); another respondent took this photo (right) near their home in New Delhi, to illustrate child labour

little attention, and even the Olympics were spoken about in terms of local financial effects on infrastructure rather than a national context.

In the UK, more than the other two locations, it seems that while there are issues that prompt strong feelings among young people, these feelings tend to be rather personal – something that may contribute to a lack of interest, and therefore participation, in some more 'national' topics. Subjects connected to growth in other countries, such as education, do not feature – perhaps representative of a generation growing up in the UK's relative stability.

Implications for political engagement

Being able to collect a series of raw, emotive thoughts – rather than rely on post-rationalisation and memory retrieval – was crucial to laying the

foundations for analysis. But, from this, as well as interviews and more specific questions sent to respondents, what can we conclude about the question of further engagement with young people?

A comprehensive answer is too ambitious given the relatively small size of this sample, but interesting findings do emerge nonetheless. It was remarkable to note from UK uploads that young people appear to have a relative lack of engagement with society as a whole – borne out by their more personal, materialistic subject material – and that their views on expressing opinion matched this. Many claimed to have little desire to effect change within their society, one girl saying, 'it's a bit like smoking, it's got to hit home before it matters to me'. Another respondent compared effecting political change to dealing with large consumer brands – 'when you've got a complaint, effort can pay off and you can get compensation, but



Figure 7 Frustrations with public transport (left), and illustrating annoyance with waste services (centre and right)

it's a lot of hard work to contact them, write a letter and go through the whole process until they finally listen'.

China offered a different prospect. With a seemingly greater connection to the community, respondents took the more optimistic view that 'all things start with the individual, and together we can make changes'. Young people therefore have 'a responsibility to contribute to society' in order to bring about change. Indeed many respondents mentioned the *weibo* ('micro-blogging', in Chinese) website, Sina, which has over 300 million registered users, including government departments and officials. Respondents spoke about posting their opinion on the site, in some cases uploading pictures with their phone to illustrate their point (an interesting reflection of our methodology) with one respondent saying, '*weibo* started in 2009 and now we've seen changes happening because of this tool, and I think that's magic'. Both Indian and UK respondents spontaneously talked about social network sites as an ideal channel for expression, and there has to be strong potential for

sparking a transparent, online discussion or dialogue in a forum such as this.

Final thoughts

By accessing the real-life thoughts and feelings of a large sample of people, in an illustrative format, and without the problem of memory loss or the presence of a researcher, we are truly able to get in to the minds of young people – something to which political parties and also brands aspire. Political and social research, as well as other disciplines, can reap huge dividends from a methodology such as this. Indeed, the principles are similar – in this case the 'category' being the country/political environment, the 'brand' being the political party and the 'product' being the policy. By avoiding direct questioning we gained a truly organic response, and by pulling apart the differences between the three countries in so effective a manner we are able to lay the foundations for analysis and sow the seeds for the development of a strategy to engage young people in politics.

This was the key achievement of the methodology.

There are of course limitations that need to be considered – not everyone has a smartphone (yet), especially across the developing world, and issues such as 3G usage and its associated cost need to be addressed. Budget size for this mini-project also meant that this sample was small, and therefore narrow (all English speaking), but the evidence that I have provided here shows that this is an incredibly potent tool moving into the future. As with all methodologies, it has to be used in the right context and, when speaking to young people, it is perfect.

This project focused on a socio-political context, but the methodology has a far wider potential. In this case scenario, through the use of a simple, easy-to-use and convenient tool, we achieved a highly productive engagement with a young target audience. When we think about the findings from the UK, this was highly useful, given that the category was, for some, very low engagement. In short, the possibilities are much greater than the scope set out here – brands wishing to engage with ‘Generation Z’, and those who have grown up with online and mobile technology being a staple part of their existence, have here a valuable asset. Projects, both wider in sample scope and longer in duration, offer their clients a direct line to the consumer and the potential of a more intimate relationship – one in which mobile technology (so often an active player within our society) becomes the catalyst.

Acknowledgements

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Many thanks to you all.

Appendix: Literature review

The following articles and websites were consulted.

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