

6th BAAL Language and New Media SIG Meeting
A force for good? Digital media, positive social change and transformative practice

Thursday, 2nd May 2019
University of Nottingham, UK

The 6th BAAL Language and New Media SIG event, hosted by Jai Mackenzie and Daniel Hunt, focused on the positive effects digital media can have on people's lives. The day included a range of presentations that critically examined the role of digital communication in redressing forms of social justice and inequality, promoting individual and group rights, and maximising communicative potential. Papers covered a range of theoretical, methodological and analytical approaches for the study of language and new media – from linguistic landscapes to small stories analysis to ethnography – showcasing the diversity of research taking place in this varied field. There were twenty-seven delegates in total, comprising academics at a range of career stages (from Doctoral Researcher to Professor), working in a range of disciplines (including English, Religious Studies and Sociology) at institutions around the UK (and one delegate from the University of Szczecin, Poland). This made for a stimulating day of conversation, discussion and debate. The event attracted a number of delegates who had not previously been members of the SIG, and who have subsequently joined the group.

The day began with a plenary talk by Professor Louise Mullany (University of Nottingham), who used her recent research about online activism in YouTube and Twitter to explore the positives and negatives that digital platforms have brought to public life, including bias, discrimination and harassment online, and to show how activists have responded through movements such as 'digilantism'. This was followed by seven short-format talks from presenters who had responded to an open call for papers. We closed the event with an extended discussion on the question of whether and how research in language and digital media can help to address issues of social justice, equality and diversity, as well as bringing together key issues and themes arising from the day. Many delegates joined us for further networking and discussion at a nearby bar on campus.



Delegates de-briefing after a productive day

A number of important themes emerged from the event, in relation to the central question of whether digital media can be a force for good in contemporary society. Several presenters showed that this is not always the case, and that digital media can certainly be harnessed to do harm. Louise Mullany and Kelly-Mae Saville, for example, demonstrated some of the ways in which Twitter and YouTube can be used to mediate online abuse, focusing on misogynistic and sexist comments and threats, and abusive behaviour towards people with dwarfism, respectively. However, neither presenter saw digital media as an exclusively negative force, with Saville, for example, showing how one activist used Twitter to promote transformative language practices around the naming of people with dwarfism.

Whilst Mullany's data was overwhelmingly negative, she showed how research in Applied Linguistics, including her own collaborative work, and the work of others such as Claire Hardaker, is helping to address abusive and discriminatory behaviour online, in part through working with policy makers and technology companies themselves.

For the majority of presenters, the positive transformational effects of digital communication took centre stage. For example, Korina Giaxoglou's account of a teenage cancer sufferer's vlogging activities showed how digital technologies can empower people with illnesses to tell their stories outside of established frameworks. Kelly-Mae Saville's exploration of one activist's efforts to 'call out' abusive behaviour towards people with dwarfism highlighted the interplay between embodied struggles and protests, and online activity. In a completely different context – that of that 2017 'Unite Cyprus Now' peace protests – Christiana Themistocleous also considered this relationship, with a focus on how protest signs move through and are resemiotised in public and digital spaces.

Extreme situations and activism were not the only subjects of interest on the day; several presenters acknowledged the positive and transformative potential of digital media in people's mundane and everyday digital engagement. Caroline Tagg and Agnieszka Lyons' exploration of 'mobile resourcefulness', for example, showed how two multilingual business owners exploited the resources available to them to get things done and keep their businesses afloat. Sumin Zhao and Rosie Flewitt considered quite a different context, analysing young children's emergent translanguaging practices on social media; nevertheless, both presentations demonstrated how people regularly affect transformation in their everyday digital communication, mobilising a range of the resources that are available to them to sustain relationships and cultural practices.

Finally, an unexpectedly prevalent theme of the day was the overlap between activism, empowerment and promotional or corporate activity. Małgorzata Sokół and Korina Giaxoglou, for example, both highlighted the important role of promotion in young people's vlogs – about environmental activism and personal experience of cancer, respectively. In the case of Sokół's environmental vloggers, some engaged in product promotion to make money from their vlogs, whilst the teen cancer sufferer investigated by Giaxoglou also undertook entrepreneurial activity, promoting and raising money for a cancer charity through her website. These talks raised questions from the audience about the persistence of corporate interests in social media platforms, and whether their influence might have an oppressive effect. Reem Al Madani investigated a context in which corporate interests explicitly come to the fore, exploring the way Arabic companies employ different language varieties on Twitter to maintain a positive image for their multiple target audiences.

This thought-provoking event offered many reminders that there is still much work to be done to investigate the ways in which language used online can ignite and perpetuate discriminatory and damaging practices and, importantly, how such practices can be resisted and challenged. Its positive focus, however, also brought socially beneficial online practices to the fore, showing that digital media can be used to raise consciousness about social problems, to express and explore diverse experiences, and to transform everyday practices. In our closing discussion, delegates looked to the future of socially-conscious research in language and new media, emphasising the importance of critically examining the nature of impact in digital media research, and carefully negotiating ethical issues throughout the research process. They noted that we must remain alert to crucial questions such as 'who will benefit from this research?', 'what kind of social justice do we want?' and 'how (indeed, *should*) we research groups who are hard to reach?'

The day confirmed that exploring the ways in which digital media are employed in innovative ways in people's everyday lives continues to be a key area for applied linguistic research, and that applied linguists are well placed to promote the use of such media for good.