The plural iPod: A study of technology in action

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A B S T R A C T

Based on a study of iPod use amongst 155 undergraduate students, the article argues that an emphasis on the mediated constitution of what Bull (2007) calls "auditory bubbles" raises limited questions around the situated and varied practices of iPod users. The article instead suggests that we need to develop more sophisticated understandings of how mobile digital devices are used and appropriated in context, not just by letting users tell their own stories but by listening carefully to how these stories point to anomalies, variations and discordances in their use and non-use.

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1. Introduction

The pervasiveness of mobile digital devices has become a central component of developed, information-rich, capitalist societies. With intense marketing campaigns, faster network services and decreased prices, these portable devices have lodged themselves into the everyday routines and communicative lifeworlds of millions of individuals. Indeed, the attractiveness of mobile phones, MP3 players, digital cameras, laptops and so on resides not just in the way they align with changing practices in how we work and play—blurring boundaries between real and virtual, private and public spaces—but also in the way they actively colour and constitute these very spaces and practices (Ling and Campbell, 2011).

In the pantheon of digital artefacts, few devices have been as much glorified and excoriated as the iPod (Levy, 2006).[1] In many ways, the definitive icon of modern consumer capitalism, the iPod has taken centre stage in debates about changing listening habits, including the reinforcement of

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[1] I'm aware that the iPod is a specific brand that stands in for a more generic type, the MP3 player. However, like other generic products (sellotape, durex, hoover), the iPod has become a catchall term for "portable audio player" and this is indicative of its market dominance and popular cultural appeal. In many respects, it has replaced the generic category of "Walkman" and, for this reason, I'll be using the two terms interchangeably throughout this article.

increasingly mobile and individualized practices of consumption and the construction of ever-more intimate relations between consumers and their devices (Bull, 2007; Jones, 2005). Part of a history of mobile audio devices that stretches back to the first automobile and transistor radios, the iPod brings into sharp focus questions at the heart of debates concerning the nature of modern societies—from the expanding reaches of the global culture industry to the micro-politics of the street. It is deeply embedded in how individuals manage their musical selves, and it is implicated in cultural and economic transformations wrought by processes of digitalization in the early 2000s (Brabazon, 2012; Kusek and Leonhard, 2005). Sylphlike in design and small enough to fit into a pocket, the iPod has enormous storage capabilities and a powerful browse-click-play interface. It is a prime digital agent in an increasingly digital age.

Despite its sociological resonances, however, there is a surprising dearth of academic literature on users' engagements with the iPod and MP3 player. Much of the published material either incorporates the device into general surveys of business and consumer culture, treats it as an artefact of new media (Jenkins, 2006) or examines its potential in fostering digital literacies amongst young people (Cooper et al., 2009). From such work, we learn a lot about how and why the iPod became a cultural icon and commercial success. As Consentino (2006) notes, the iPod's success was far from inevitable, but it came about as a result of a unique confluence of Apple's business acumen, the take off of the iTunes store (which became a legal "skin" for downloading practice) and the idea of a "digital lifestyle". In the main, however, this work leaves unanswered important questions regarding the concrete uses of the device and its implications for social relations. The notable exception is the work of Bull (2000, 2002, 2007), whose examinations of the role of personal audio devices in the city have shaped academic (Beer, 2007) and popular (Kahney, 2005) understandings of this area. Bull locates the iPod in regimes of mobile privatized listening that structure relations between users and their urban environments. In creating their own privatized enclaves, Bull argues, users manage the flow of time and space. They are solipsistic monads whose fantasies of control drive a wedge between themselves and other urban inhabitants.

Whilst drawing on Bull's important work, this article attempts an empirical supplement and a conceptual challenge. Based on a study of iPod use amongst 155 undergraduate students, the article argues that an emphasis on the mediated constitution of what Bull calls "auditory bubbles" (Bull, 2007, p. 3) raises compelling questions around urban dislocation. Crucial, here, is how users' strategies of withdrawal and control are designed to enhance relations to the city in ways that attenuate the perceived monotony of urban routine. Just as the iPod becomes a technology for "warming up" the city so it serves to place users in a state of what Bull calls "accompanied solitude" (Bull, 2005, p. 343). But there's much more to say, here, for restricting the analysis of iPod use to the dialectics of alienation-colonization results in a partial depiction. Evidence from the present study, instead, points to assorted modalities of deployment and a strongly ethical component to the management of the iPod in urban settings. Users reported more varied and unpredictable uses for their devices, to cement everyday social relations as well as withdraw from them. They deftly managed the "affordances" (Hutchby, 2001) of the device in ways that extended its function beyond that of machinic cocoon, even abandoning its use when it was perceived to intrude too much into their lives.

These non-standardised engagements point up the need to augment an analysis of the technics of seclusion with attention to intra and inter-individual variations in use and users (Lahire, 2011). It means that we have to understand basic questions of demographic and utilitarian heterogeneity amongst user populations before we condemn them to a general state of solipsism. In evoking the deliberately provocative term "plural iPod" (provocative in that most commentators are inclined to see the iPod as a device whose effects are implacable and homogenizing), this article suggests that we need to develop more sophisticated understandings of how mobile digital devices are used and appropriated in practice, not just by letting users tell their own stories but by listening carefully to how these stories point to anomalies, variations and discordances. The article therefore takes it cue from work in the sociology of technology sensitized to the question of how technological artefacts are actioned by users and non-users (Bell, 2006; Hutchby, 2001; Oudshoorn and Pinch, 2003), where the daily currency of urban technologies and cultural forms are folded into the contingencies of everyday practices. From this perspective, it will be argued, we get a more nuanced sense of the iPod in action and a less reductive depiction of users' engagements with digital audio technologies.