



Looking out for each other online: Digital outreach, emotional surveillance and safe(r) spaces



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ABSTRACT

This article is concerned with what it means to think of online spaces as emotionally safe or safer. It does this by looking at the sharing of emotional distress online and the role of organisations in identifying and proactively engaging with such distress. This latter type of digital engagement is analytically interesting and rendered increasingly feasible by algorithmic developments, but its implications are relatively unexplored. Such interventions tend to be understood dualistically: as a form of supportive digital outreach *or* as emotional surveillance. Through an analysis of blog data about a Twitter-based suicide prevention app, this article attempts to understand the tensions and also the potential points of connection between these two meanings of ‘looking out for each other’ online. From an avowedly sociological, relational and emotional perspective, it tries to offer a more nuanced account of what it might mean to share emotional distress ‘safely’ online.

This article engages with what it means to think of an online space as emotionally safe or, recognising the impossibility of guaranteeing safety completely or indefinitely, *safer*. Drawing on a case study of Radar, a Twitter based suicide prevention app introduced and then withdrawn by a leading UK charity, it examines how and why people share emotional distress on Twitter and the implications for organisations who choose to engage proactively with such distress. Such engagement has tended to be framed as either surveillance *or* harm-preventing ‘outreach’; as expressions, for instance, of digital capitalism and moral entrepreneurship (Reeves, 2017) *or*, more positively, digital caring and ‘digital professionalism’ (Ellaway et al., 2015). Yet the ensuing debates are rarely grounded in research on experiences of such practices (Robert et al., 2015). Bringing these two framings into conversation is important precisely because organisations thinking of outreach need to understand practices *already* happening in different online spaces.

Creating dialogue requires careful exploration of differences and also potential shared concerns. In the case of suicide prevention apps, the latter include anxieties about risk: anxieties drive the expansion of surveillance in general (Crawford, 2014) but they are particularly powerful in the context of suicide prevention because of the fatal consequences of ‘signs’ being overlooked. Practices to identify such signs can be thought of as a form of emotional surveillance. Adapting Lyon’s (2007: 14) definition of surveillance, emotional surveillance can be understood as ‘focused, systematic and routine attention’ being paid

to information that appears to be relevant to our emotions ‘for purposes of influence, management, protection or direction’. Surveillance is also emotional, however, in the sense that Crawford (2014) notes above: that there are affective consequences for both those doing the surveillance and being surveilled. The consequences for the latter are familiar from the literature on surveillance but surveillers, too, can be ‘haunted by a very particular kind of data anxiety: that no matter how much data they have, it is always incomplete’.

The overall aim here is not, therefore, to add to existing critiques of the Radar app (Lee, 2014; Reeves, 2017), but to inform practice and conceptual debates about ‘safe sharing’ of emotions online. This involves moving beyond a focus on individuals, and their rights to privacy (though see Bernal (2014) for an account of privacy as a communal value), towards a more *emotional* and *relational* approach to understanding online sharing. By this, I mean considering pre-existing relationships online as well as relationships between those doing, and being on the receiving end, of the outreach/surveillance. This approach also means engaging with what people believe they are doing by expressing emotions in particular spaces: keeping safe on Twitter, for instance, may involve the expression of apparently unsafe or risky feelings.

Such situated analyses of what is being termed here digital outreach are necessary, as it is meaningless to speak of outreach or the sharing of emotional distress online *in general* (Hines, 2015). Before outlining the methodology for the study, the Radar app is first positioned in the

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context of recent work on digital outreach and on the sharing of emotions and online spaces more generally.¹

1. Online distress and digital outreach

While it is not always possible to clearly distinguish between the two (Tucker and Goodings, 2017), there is increasing recognition of the significance of both informal emotional support on social media (Eggertson, 2015) and digital outreach, a proactive form of support facilitated by organisations such as voluntary or government bodies. The challenges of this latter type of ‘digital professionalism’ (Ellaway et al., 2015) are debated but, as Facebook’s recent announcement about the use of algorithms to identify suicidal users makes clear (Kelion, 2017), it is increasingly presumed that social networking platforms have the potential to ‘promote positive change’ in relation to mental health (Inkster et al., 2016) and to offer digital ‘safe spaces’.

At the same time, however, there are concerns that such outreach can become a form of ‘health surveillance’ (French and Smith, 2013; Lupton, 2012). Regardless of whether or not it is framed as emotional surveillance, the complexities of how selves are presented, on and off-line (Murthy, 2012), make the interpretation of online content by those engaged in online support difficult. This is particularly evident in relation to suicide (Mok et al., 2016). Reflecting wider dichotomous views of the Internet, its role in relation to suicide is often perceived as Manichean: a struggle between dark/death and light/life (Robert et al., 2015). Social media is increasingly part of this context (Christensen, 2014). There is evidence, on the one hand, that informal online suicide communities can be valued by participants for their mutuality (Baker and Fortune, 2008); on the other, of suicidal postings not being acknowledged or of forums maintaining or even amplifying suicidal feelings (Mok et al., 2016). Similar concerns about how online sharing may reinforce or exacerbate risky behaviours have also been noted in relation to other practices (Cantó-Milà and Seebach, 2011).

Reflecting the ambiguity of emotional expression, the task of distinguishing between harmful and helpful content in these contexts is complex: apparently ‘dangerous’ text can act as a deterrent, be life-affirming or empowering, and be read differently over time (Mars et al., 2015). Suicide prevention apps (resources designed to support a person in distress) are increasingly a part of this complex digital landscape. They range from social media interventions² to smart phone self-help apps³ (Aguirre et al., 2013). Facebook has been the platform most closely associated with these developments⁴ but, in 2014, Samaritans, a charity that provides emotional support to people experiencing distress, launched a Twitter-based app, Radar,⁵ under the tagline, ‘turn your social net into a safety net’⁶. This allowed registered users to be alerted when a Twitter account they followed included messages that might suggest depressed or suicidal thoughts. Although media and other responses to the app were initially positive, it proved increasingly controversial and was withdrawn nine days after its launch. To understand this, we need to look beyond digital outreach to what it means to share emotions in online spaces and how such spaces come to be thought of as safe or safer.

¹ While, of course, it is possible for practices to be digital and not involve the Internet, to reflect common usage when discussing social media, digital is used here synonymously with online. In order to avoid reinforcing digital dualisms (Jurgenson, 2011), however, the description ‘virtual’ has been avoided, except when referencing other authors’ use of the term.

² See <http://www.durkheimproject.org/>.

³ http://www.prevent-suicide.org.uk/stay_alive_suicide_prevention_mobile_phone_application.html.

⁴ See <http://www.intheforefront.org/forefront-and-facebook-launch-suicide-prevention-tool>.

⁵ <http://www.samaritans.org/news/samaritans-radar-announcement>.

⁶ <http://www.samaritans.org/sites/default/files/kcfinder/branches/branch-96/files/Samaritans%20Radar%20Walkthrough.pdf>.

2. Materiality, relations and emotions in and across (online) space

Notions of ‘space’, including ‘safe spaces’, are key to the sharing of emotion online. An understanding of space as not innate but constituted and reconstituted through our actions and interpretations is long-standing (Bondi, 2005; Cronin, 2014) and has been applied to online settings (Marino, 2015). However, despite initial framings that digital space might involve the collapsing of time and the overcoming of materialities, the relations through which *all* space is produced remain stubbornly material (Massey, 2005). The ‘new’ material turn has placed matter at the heart of analysis of space, including online, reminding us, as Lehdonvirta (2010: 885) put it, that the online world is less an ‘open frontier’ than a ‘built-up’ area. This materiality is relevant not just because, as Fayard (2012) notes, virtual space involves ‘a lot of stuff’, hard and software, but because all users of such spaces are embodied and embedded in particular places (Hines, 2015) and because online spaces have socio-material consequences. In other words, space – online or otherwise – is constituted through, but also shapes, social relations (Lefebvre, 1991): it can keep people in (their) place or help them move. Not surprisingly, then, online space is often made sense of through material metaphors. This is true, too, of the sharing of emotion in online space, though the metaphors used in this context speak to the more ethereal aspects of offline space: atmosphere (Tucker and Goodings, 2017), intimacy (Michaelsen, 2017) or ambiance (Thompson, 2008).

The relational emphasis on understanding space, noted in the above discussion of materialities, is often framed in an online context in terms of sharing. Despite being under-conceptualised (Kennedy, 2015), sharing is key to analysing online space because the Internet is both a space where sharing happens and is made up of spaces constituted *through* such sharing. Because the online realm is made up of relational spaces, it is also emotional. In addressing the sharing of *emotion* specifically, I am concerned with both the meanings identified above: that is, to give and receive emotion, and to do so jointly within the same space – but also with a third, less researched dimension, that is, to have the same understanding of an emotion (or why that emotion was expressed) as another. Research on the role of technological affordances, social relations and norms on sharing across different social media suggest a complex interplay between the three (Bucholtz, 2013). To understand this interplay involves going beyond what it means technically to be a Twitter user/follower (Bruns and Moe, 2014) to examine the meaning Twitter users give to the sharing of emotion and how this sharing constitutes, as much as is mediated by, space.

2.1. Constituting safe(r) spaces

When people talk about safe spaces, notions of the relational and emotional are present but not always foregrounded. Safe spaces are ‘imaginary construction [s]’ (Stengel, 2010:524) that involve complex boundary work in relation to the imagined ‘unsafe’ (Rosenfeld and Noterman, 2014). The impossibility of wholly or indefinitely achieving exclusion or inclusion ensures that the boundaries and the spaces created are always porous, contestable and shifting and for this reason it makes sense to refer to safer rather than safe spaces.

Discourses about ‘safety’ in relation to mental health, race, class or sexuality (Haber, 2016), for instance, are sometimes framed around the exclusion of others and, at other times, through inclusion – for instance, the idea of a safe space for *all*. The idea of being ‘safe to’ express oneself, without repercussion and perhaps in contestation of dominant discourses, is core to the creation of a space as safe but cannot always be separated from the idea of being ‘safe from’. This speaks to a long history of the public sphere as a space of surveillance and exclusion but also, especially for marginalised groups, as a space of radical potential, a ‘haven’ away from the oppressions of the private sphere (Haber, 2016). Online spaces, because of their relative anonymity and ease of access, have been seen as potentially offering increased access to safe(r) spaces, though these same features can also increase the risk of feeling

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