Living Research Five: Public anger in research (and social media)

At our end-of-project conference, one participant said that the event had made her think that ‘when outraged by something’ she would try to research it; ‘combine activism with academia and your sociological imagination’. Strikingly, this comment captured much of what brought us together to develop the research discussed in this book. In this section, we will tell a story of how sparks of outrage and anger led to this research, consider how social media allowed us to connect and channel that anger, reflect on the ways in which we tried to use these emotions and technologies in the process of our research and identify some of the findings from engaging with social media as a research tool.

Twitter and anger as motivators

When the Home Office launched Operation Vaken in July 2013 (see Chapter 1) all of the authors of this book were angered by the seeming overt and unapologetic racism of the Go Home van slogan, apparent racial profiling in immigration checks in public places and the Home Office’s publication of images of raids through Twitter using the #immigrationoffenders hashtag (see Figure 3). We expressed this over email, on social media and in conversation. Several weeks earlier, some of us, with others, had met as a group of academics and activists when Gargi organised a workshop on ‘race critical public scholarship’ at the University of East London (for a sense of the discussions there, see Murji and Bhattacharyya, 2013). Drawing on links we had established there and elsewhere, and using a combination of online and offline communications, we came together as a research team in response to developing Home Office initiatives, as described in Chapter 1.

Figure 3: Storify of Twitter interactions which helped to initiate the research for this book

We managed – at least by the standards of academic research! – to act quickly to gather networks, plan and begin the project. This was aided by communication tools like Twitter (see Figure 3), in conjunction with ‘in-person’ relationships between colleagues, friends and collaborators. We were motivated to do this research by a mutual commitment to ‘public sociology’ (Burawoy, 2005) – that is, a belief in the importance of bringing sociological analysis of people, power and institutions to a public audience for use in understanding everyday questions, struggles and situations. We worked as a group because this made the most sense in terms of pooling ideas, expertise and resources and learning. We also tried to maintain dialogue beyond the research team throughout each stage of the research – including with wider publics through Twitter, blogs, public meetings and media engagement (see also Living Research Three and Six).

It might seem odd to suggest that research – never mind collaborative, publicly engaged research – could be motivated by anger. Anger is often viewed as a negative emotion – either as destructive or as distracting from calm analysis or action. However, the writer and activist Audre Lorde has written powerfully of the value of anger as a motivator:

Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. Focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change. And when I speak of change, I do not mean a simple switch of positions or a temporary lessening of tensions, nor the ability to smile or feel good. *I am speaking of a basic and radical alteration in those assumptions underlining our lives ...* anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification.

(Lorde, 1984; emphasis added)

Lorde is here talking about anger and passion in motivating activism and political change. As academic researchers, our role might be more readily imagined as *finding out* and *analysing* rather than *changing* things. However, in the lines emphasised in the above quote, Lorde speaks of change as ‘a basic and radical alteration in ... assumptions’. Part of social research must always be about gathering evidence that helps to demonstrate contradictions in common-sense assumptions, and producing new ways of thinking that help us understand those assumptions and their contradictions – and perhaps thereby change things. The power of anger as a motivating

force, as Lorde argues and as our research here demonstrates, does not necessarily remove space for analytical and careful thought, but instead can point us to areas where such thought is urgently needed (see Chapter 1 for a discussion of how this relates to ideas about ‘militant investigation’ (Casas-Cortes et al., 2014) in migration research).

Anger and activism on Twitter

We built analysis of social media into our research – since the Home Office had used them in its own campaigns, but also as an increasingly important format for political debate, and a medium whose role in political activism has not yet been fully understood. We wanted to see how people used Twitter to respond to Home Office campaigns, not just in terms of the content of what they said but also the ways in which this use interacted with other forms of response. If people were angry, did they let off steam with a tweet and then forget it, as Jodi Dean suggests in *Blog Theory*? Dean asks whether social media constitute ‘communication for its own sake’, and cautions that ‘the affective charges we transmit and confront reinforce and extend affective networks without encouraging – and, indeed, by displacing – their consolidation into organized political networks’ (2010: 119). That is, Dean suggests that interactions on social media do not go beyond sharing humour or outrage. But we wanted to ask whether, in sharing through this medium, possibilities were created for ‘anger expressed and translated into action’, as Audre Lorde might imagine.

One method we tried out as part of our online ethnography was to organise Twitter debates using the project’s @MICResearch Twitter account, asking our Twitter followers provocative questions which we hoped would open up debate. While there were a few interesting exchanges, overall there was not much discussion. We found, perhaps unsurprisingly, that the more dynamic engagements and online conversations emerged organically in response to our project tweets and blog posts, and especially during our workshops and conference, rather than through deliberately orchestrated online discussions. Perhaps this points to the need to engage with social media through its own logic – to understand its flows of discussion and meaning organically, rather than something that can be engineered through tools more suited to other forms of interaction, such as focus groups. Importantly, we recognised that the ‘organic’ ways in which Twitter worked to develop discussion and action was

not simply in an online forum, but through the interactions between ‘real-life’ events and engagements, and online ones.

Many responses to the Home Office both politically and playfully highlighted the heavy-handedness of their campaign – at the same time increasing its reach as a news story and topic of public debate. Some responses demonstrated the absurdity of the government campaign by taking it at its word. The Twitter user Pukkah Punjabi wrote about how she had called the number advertised and asked for help to go home – to her home in Willesden Green, North London (Punjabi, 2013). Hundreds of people followed suit (asking to be sent back to Scotland, the West Country and East London for example), and the Home Office’s own evaluation of Operation Vaken found that 1,034 (66 per cent) of the texts and 13 (14 per cent) of the calls received in response to the van were classified as ‘hoax’; added to this, 123 (8 per cent) of the texts and 21 (23 per cent) of the calls they received were complaints (Home Office, 2013). Though apparently minor acts of protest – and perhaps in some cases simply jokes – it seems to us that these responses managed to respond nimbly, turning the government’s own choice of communication method back on itself, jamming the signal, within the tradition of ‘culture jamming’.¹

The image of the Go Home van, like the #racistvan hashtag, became a meme which long outlasted the summer of 2013. The civil rights organisation Liberty produced its own (real-life) van with the slogan ‘Stirring up tension and division in the UK illegally? Home Office, think again,’ targeted at gaining press and social media attention. More informally, photoshopped parodies multiplied on Twitter; examples included a slogan telling the Romans to go home (playing on the Monty Python ‘what did the Romans ever do for us?’ joke); another told the Australian lobbyist Lynton Crosby (rumoured to be behind the idea of the Go Home van) to go home, pointing out the irony of an Australian telling immigrants to leave the UK. Later, Mark Harper MP (Immigration Minister at the time of Operation Vaken) was caught employing a cleaner whose visa was not in order and forced to resign, and so his face ended up on the side of a photoshopped van too. The Go Home van reappeared as a satirical template in the run up to the May 2014 European Parliament

¹The term ‘culture jamming’ was coined in 1984 by Don Joyce of the experimental music band Negativland, and since then has become more widely used to mean the appropriation and subversion of media representations. See Chandler and Neumark (2005).

election, this time with the anti-EU and anti-immigration UK Independence Party (UKIP) more often than not the target of the joke.

Twitter was used also as a means of organising on-the-ground resistance to immigration raids. Where the Home Office had tried to disseminate news of its success in numbers of arrests during raids, activists shared sightings of (increasingly visible) Immigration Enforcement vehicles and officers on streets around the UK. Sometimes this was through organised activist groups like the Anti-Raids Network and London Black Revolutionaries, in other cases individual Twitter users shared the locations of their sightings. In some cases, this simply alerted others that raids were taking place; in others, it seems to have enabled activists to arrive on the scene and disrupt enforcement actions. This use of social media, not just to raise awareness but to organise and co-ordinate direct action in person, suggests that its role in the political arena should not simply be dismissed as ‘clicktivism’ – the idea that political action is reduced simply to the click of a mouse, without further engagement. As the journalist Laurie Penny said after the 2015 General Election, ‘an angry population is hard to govern; a depressed population is easy’ (2015). Anger can also provoke us to act, as was the case for us and our project. Online platforms present both possibilities and limitations in terms of how anger and humour can be used to mobilise or to create dialogue, within and beyond research.

If you conduct social research yourself, what motivates you to do it? If you read or use social research, what motivates you to do so?

What do you think is the place of anger, or other emotions, in social research? How would you reconcile the idea of research motivated by anger with ideas of scientific objectivity or ideas of situated subjects (see also Living Research Four)?

Do you use social media such as Twitter? If so, what do you use it for? Do you see it as a tool of the social researcher? What are the challenges and limitations of using social media as:

- 1 a source of already-existing data to analyse
- 2 a method or tool for producing new data
- 3 a tool for disseminating research findings?

References

- Burawoy, M. (2005) 'For public sociology', *American Sociological Review*, 70: 4–28.
- Casas-Cortes, M., Cobarrubias, S., De Genova, N., Garelli, G., Grappi, G., Heller, C., Hess, S., Kasperek, B., Mezzadra, S., Neilson, B., Peano, I., Pezzani, L., Pickles, J., Rahola, F., Riedner, L., Scheel, S. and Tazzioli, M. (2014) 'New keywords: migration and borders', *Cultural Studies*, 29 (1): 1–33.
- Chandler, A. and Neumark, N. (eds) (2005) *At a Distance: Precursors to Art and Activism on the Internet*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Dean, J. (2010) *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Home Office (2013) *Operation Vaken Evaluation Report October 2013*, London: Home Office, https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/254411/Operation_Vaken_Evaluation_Report.pdf [last accessed 22 May 2016].
- Lorde, A. (1984) *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press.
- Murji, K. and Bhattacharyya, G. (eds) (2013) *Race Critical Public Scholarship (Ethnic and Racial Studies)*, London: Routledge.
- Penny, L. (2015) 'Don't give in: An angry population is hard to govern; a depressed population is easy', *New Statesman*, 9 May, <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2015/05/dont-give-angry-population-hard-govern-depressed-population-easy> [last accessed 22 May 2016].
- Punjabi, P. (2013) 'The day I asked the Home Office to help me go home – to Willesden Green', *The Guardian*, 28 July, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jul/28/willesden-green-twitter-wind-up-immigrants [last accessed 22 May 2016].