

# EVENT REPORT

## 2020

# THE VISUAL AND CRITICAL REPRESENTATION IN **AN AGE OF IMPACT**

Organised by The Politics of Representation Collective, funded by The Sociological Review and The Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge



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# INTRODUCTION

In March 2020, the Politics of Representation Collective held a seminar entitled 'The Visual and Critical Representation in an Age of Impact', which brought together leading academics and practitioners from across the UK to discuss the politics of representation in an increasingly accelerated, regulated, metrics-driven and marketised academic environment (Black et al., 2015; Vostal, 2016). The seminar aimed to consider the requirements to demonstrate research impact, as demanded by the UK's Research Excellence Framework, and the growing reliance of researchers on social media metrics and visual outputs. The seminar asked : To what extent does this emerging trend for social media presence consume our attention to the point of neglecting how those whom we research are represented, or misrepresented?

The goal for the day was to strengthen participants' awareness of themselves (and their work) as public-facing social actors, and their ethical responsibility towards those with whom they work, and research. Throughout the day over 35 attendees joined us from the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge; the wider university and universities in the UK. Reasons for participation ranged from "I was interested in using 'photography' in my research" to "I have a general interest in ethics and representation".

*The day was made possible with the support of many individuals (to whom we are very grateful), and also the team at The Sociological Review, who provided funding for this seminar and The Faculty of Education, who also provided funding to support this event.*

# OPENING TALK:

The Challenge of Representation in the Accelerated Academy - The Promise and Pitfalls of Social Media

The first talk of the day, 'The Challenge of Representation in the Accelerated Academy - The Promise and Pitfalls of Social Media', was given by Dr Mark Carrigan, a sociologist at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge. Mark opened with a consideration of representation as a sociological question; these challenges are particularly prevalent in the current context of the strike in higher education and with the movement to the concept of 'post truth' in politics. Mark drew on his extensive research on social media to explore how representation has been pluralised due to the fact it is increasingly easy for people to reproduce and circulate media, without a linkage to the creator.



What are some of the ways we can solve issues of representation? There are new structures that are shaping scholarly representation, particularly the accelerated academy, where there is a focus on citations and metrics. But, does social media hold promise? Mark considered the benefits, the fact that information can be shared faster, and for free, and that individuals can expand networks and increase readership. He also noted that

collectives can stimulate a collaborative ethos online. For representation, social media holds the potential to expand our repertoire, and break out of the formalised genres of traditional academic dissemination, as well as allow for real time interaction with those represented.

However, Mark also cautioned against getting caught up in 'The Twittering Machine' with commercial incentives pushing people to maximise attention and reaction, and that it can provide a platform for pre-existing harassment and prejudice. Additionally, the threat of 'the impact machine' looms large, affecting a paradigm shift in research, where staff are encouraged to undertake public engagement, including on social media platforms.

Finally, Mark shared a number of reflections on whether we can escape the social media and impact machine. Individually, we can forgo these inducements of impact, do engagement under the radar and use social media in ways which cannot be counted - a politics of refusal. But there is also the opportunity for collective solutions - to reframe social media as a way to stimulate collegial coordination and collaboration that encourages social listening and 'radioactivity rather than virality.'

The Q&A session also raised some really pertinent reflections, in particular the idea of social media as 'an incomplete positive' whereby Twitter can allow more of a conversation outside of the site of academia that is a place of domination and colonial power. Twitter, for example could enable wider reflection and conversation, creating counter-spaces and preventing academia from becoming an individualised pursuit.

# PANEL SESSION:

## Learning from Other Sectors - Competing Goals of Representation

The second part of the day, a panel focussing on Learning from Other Sectors: Competing Goals of Representation, chaired by Sharon Walker, University of Cambridge, sought to reflect on the following framing questions:

- You are all approaching issues of representation from different sector perspectives, mediums and job roles, what unique contribution does your 'standpoint' bring to advancing ethical practices in representation?
- Given the range of organisations you have worked for, or in collaboration with, including those exerting a certain degree of power in their sector and globally, what challenges have you faced in remaining true to your own ethical position?
- In what ways do you use your work to challenge existing (mis)representations? Do you have a particular example?





Tunde Alabi-Hundeyin II, a media creative and PhD student focussing on humanitarian narratives, was the first to speak. His presentation entitled 'Louder than a gaze: the dilemma of binary visual narratives in charity representations', focused on the differences in representation that children from different contexts are afforded. Particularly stark was the use of actors 'to protect identities' in charity videos about child poverty in the UK context, in

contrast to those raising funds for poverty elsewhere. Tunde highlighted the colonial gaze that is still ever-present in these photographs and narratives and in representations of poverty; this gaze contributes to dehumanisation through representation. Tunde's important work, which he shared, seeks to disrupt this narrative, using the concept of utopia and participatory photography, to enable those involved in humanitarian settings to share their own narratives of their experience.



Dr Kalifa Damani began her presentation by defining how she likes to capture and reflect on what is going on around her; 'being an artist is not about how you do things, but it is about how you see the world.' She noted that being an artist is inherently about creating an illusion, looking at something at one point in time, and portraying that to others. But this raises difficult questions about 'reality' - what is reality? Is it emotional, imagined, now, or later? She shared pertinent reflections on her own identity and how this filters through all that she is, and the art she produces, arguing that there is no objective reality in her work, nor should there be. There are challenges in ethical and appropriate representation in visual work - in particular, Kalifa considered 'how do we convey the ugly, without removing the ugly'. She questioned

whether art can help us to convey the ugly, without taking away someone's individual reality, as well as help to protect people, and prevent them from feeling dehumanised.



Finally, Dr Shreepali Patel of the [StoryLab](#) at [Anglia Ruskin University](#) spoke of her fascinating work of 'hyper reality' through the way in which her work seeks to uncover and explore diverse stories. She spoke about the work of StoryLab, and how they work with narratives across multiple modes, including film, sound, alternative reality, digital technology and more; they seek to combine storytelling with creative practice, to tell stories that they hope can have an impact. Triggered by the backdrop of the fourth industrial revolution, the consideration of representation is particularly pertinent. In particular, Shreepali spoke about a recent piece of work, 'The Crossing', the story of a young woman's journey of being sex trafficked. She talked about the way in which the StoryLab had represented this story; using a physical installation made up of nine containers, designed by different artists. The purpose was to enable the 'viewer' to feel some part of what this experience would feel like. Shreepali reflected on the power of multimodal experiences and their ability to see the combination between individual and collective experiences.

The Q&A session was equally as engaging and enlightening, with reflections on what you can take from reference images during the design process, and honouring what you give back to others, modes and methods of representations - the ethical challenges of telling someone's entire story, whilst cognisant that it may be 'read' in different ways by different audiences; and the importance of trust, and who it is afforded to in the process from creation to dissemination. There were also multiple questions, and thoughtful considerations from the panel about the agenda for misrepresentation, and the complexity of positionality, even when one tries to disrupt existing power dynamics.



# ZINE MAKING WORKSHOP:

Resisting Managerialism - Collaborative Dissemination

After lunch, we were fortunate to have Soofiya hosting a workshop for us, entitled Resisting Managerialism: Collaborative Dissemination. They shared their reflections on the promise of collaborative dissemination and pedagogy; in particular, that it should follow 10 steps:

1. **Balance** - between theory and practice, teacher and student, and other dichotomies -
2. **Contextual** - contextually and culturally informed curriculum
3. **Curiosity** - ask questions, ask why, ask how, explore, investigate, figure stuff out
4. **Self-reflective** - continuously self-reflective and providing spaces for self-reflection -
5. **Process** - a space for process and soft skills
6. **Decolonization** - a critical approach to assumed knowledge/where this comes from and the histories which it is built on
7. **Co-creation** - of knowledge, of ideas, of space etc.
8. **Facilitate** - ideas, spaces and opportunities for learning
9. **Incompleteness** - learning as a process/small selection, allowing space and awareness for incomplete knowledge, learnings etc.
10. **Critical consciousness** - allowing space for (social and political) contradictions and tools to build critical exploration



Soof then led us in a zine-making activity, 'What's your manifesto?' where we were asked to reflect on 'what is important to you?' 'what do you care about?' and 'what loose theme do you want your work and career to explore?' After reflecting on these questions, participants turned these answers in to quick, punchy bullet points, and then turned those bullet points into a zine!

At the end, Soof led some reflections on the zine-making process, encouraging all to reflect on what they had learnt from creating their manifesto, and in particular, what we could learn from others: how had they been presented and what were the visual choices made? One attendee noted that "the zine activity was awesome" and another that "the simplicity through which you could present ideas and research findings through zines has opened up another avenue for dissemination for my work."

# WORKSHOP:

## The 'Visual' in Research

This workshop, led by Savannah Dodd from [The Photography Ethics centre](http://www.photoethics.org), gave an extensive grounding of the considerations we need to make when using the 'visual' in either our research or dissemination processes. She introduced the term 'indexicality' and related this to considerations of the truthfulness of a photograph to emphasise the point that all observation is subjective:

*"A photograph might be an accurate reflection of the literal placement of objects within the frame, yet the information that a photograph relays is complicated by the various conscious and subconscious decisions the photographer makes during the process of taking a photograph" (Dodd, forthcoming)*

So what choices do we make when photographing? Using fascinating visuals of her own, Savannah encouraged us to reflect on the choices that photographers make about what to photograph, and how this influences people's perceptions of a place or location, emphasising the "danger of a single story."



The discussion then moved to the relationship between 'the visible' and 'the visual' and the importance of considering visual language and aesthetic decisions when using visual approaches. The discussion focused on the fact that "aesthetic choices are not benign. They impact the visual language of our photographs." Through detailing some challenges that photographers face, particularly in thinking about the cultural contexts in which photographs are viewed, Savannah provided some key questions that all researchers considering using visuals in their own work need to stop and consider, particularly the context of publication, which shapes the way visual media is curated, packaged and read. One participant noted: "I have often wondered what questions I should be asking myself when choosing photos for dissemination, or how to explain why certain images feel problematic. Now I feel like I have the language to be able to ask these questions, and challenge the use of certain images."

# DISCUSSION:

## Reframing Research for the 'Public'

The day concluded with an inspiring session with Chantelle Lewis and Tissot Regis from [The Surviving Society podcast](#), a sociology podcast which is anti-racist and about class politics. They reflected on the following questions:

### **Why do you feel the format of the podcast is an effective way to do public sociology, how can this, or does this at times operate as a more appropriate means of communication than the visual?**

Chantelle and Tissot's reflections focused on how academia has a problem of overcomplicating things, but sociology is something that we talk about all the time in our everyday life; the podcast is an opportunity for people to do that, to engage with theory and the wider conversations going on! Podcasts offer a way through which top down power can be taken and owned by the people at the bottom, rather than corporations or institutions controlling what is created and consumed. Representation, or not having been represented at all, is important, and the podcast is a way to deal with these issues. Another benefit of the podcast, as a means of communication, was the ease, accessibility, and spontaneity with which conversations can happen. In particular Chantelle reflected on the barriers that she faced in the academy, which is not set up for people who are neurodiverse, but podcasts have enabled a space to show that neurodiverse people do belong in the academy, and has provided a way for her and potentially others, to out of being forced through a system. They both explained how podcasts can take people on a journey of understanding.

### **What are the limitations of podcasting?**

Firstly mentioned, is that it is ignorant to assume everyone has access to the internet. Additionally, people's capacity to listen for an hour/45 minutes in an era of soundbites can pose a challenge! But these limits are overcome as people look for podcasts that resonate with them - they choose to listen! On a practical level, Chantelle and Tissot described the time-consuming nature of podcasting, as well as listening back to your own voice! They also considered the broader critiques of how podcasts can be echo chambers, but they did not think this was a problem - Surviving Society is not an objective podcast, but is anti-racist, anti-transphobic, and anti-sexist podcast. It is not about a marketplace of ideas, but about putting forward that people have a right to be respected.

## How do you incorporate visual language, and strategize design for social media audiences?

Chantelle and Tissot sat in front of a presentation, which showed how they leverage audio and images for representation on social media, and also related to the possibility of representation within the social sciences; paying homage to the fact that we have always been here, whether or not we have been represented or not! They explained that George (the Surviving Society editor) takes photos of them podcasting, which they can then use as memes, during public events such as the general election, for example; they use these images organically, using the visual for politics and talking about current affairs.



## How do you balance the need to create impact, grab attention (attention economy), and maintain an ethical and critical tone?

Chantelle and Tissot were clear that they do not balance - "we don't need to contribute to a toxic environment... We disagree with reactionary ideas being spouted through the media - don't want to be part of this!" People might want pithy answers, but Surviving Society only does this in a way that supports anti-racist and class politics that speaks truth to power.

## What are the challenges of ethical representation when doing something as dynamic and spontaneous as voice/podcasting?

Surviving Society are very explicit about their approach to ensuring inclusion - this is an ethical decision they make with every issue. They reflected on how, as they are putting conversation out there in the public domain, they have to be careful. They make sure to give presenters the space to go away from the podcast and edit or remove what they have said, and they never put anything out there that people are not comfortable with, or anything that is remotely racist/sexist/transphobic/classist - "we have a duty of care to our guests and to ourselves", so editing is vital for representation in this anti-racist endeavour. They considered the importance of wanting to reach more listeners, but being very careful so that what they are doing is not co-opted by institutions.

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The Q&A led to additional reflections about the future of their podcast. The Surviving Society podcast is very careful about who they partner with, they have their own patreon and reflect very carefully on the future, and not on replicating the neoliberal idea of 'growth.' They focus on slow incremental growth to have a connection with people. Podcasts have enabled the dissemination of knowledge, and focussing on getting voices heard beyond academia. Anyone who listens to the Surviving Society podcast, could be a guest!

A highlight for many, this session really emphasised the importance of considering different modes of dissemination and engagement. One attendee fed back "Podcasting is something I have been aware of, but hearing about the amazing work of Chantelle and Tissot in using podcasting to disrupt academic power dynamics, really emphasised the potential of podcasting for dissemination."

# CONFERENCE OUTCOMES

- In the next few months, we will be releasing podcasts of the panel session and the Surviving Society podcast session (as well as their interview with Dr Mark Carrigan) - these will be uploaded to our website, <https://politicsofrepresentationcollective.org> and the Surviving Society podcast.
- We will be putting together a proposal for a Special Issue, and will put out the call for papers in the next few months - sign up to our mailing list if you are interested in being involved (<https://politicsofrepresentationcollective.org/stay-updated>).
- We will continue to build on the strong connections made at this seminar and at our previous conference - Ethical Debates about Representation in Research in November 2018, aiming to coordinate further discussions and conversations across more universities and interested organisations within the UK and beyond.

# CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

The event was made possible by the amazing support of many, and was engaging, vibrant and thought-provoking due to the brilliant presenters. As highlighted by one participant: "The diversity of presenters and workshops was amazing and fantastic participants".

In holding the session, the Politics of Representation Collective sought to cultivate an inclusive space through which questions could be posed, and solutions raised to support those involved to consider the pitfalls and potentials of ethical representation in visual research and dissemination. We feel grateful to have been able to bring together this group of academics and practitioners, and hope that all would agree with the participant who summarised that "it was truly engaging and a wonderful vessel of knowledge."