

**CONNECTING THE SOCIAL AND REFLECTING THE INDIVIDUAL:
HOW ST ANDREWS STUDENT RADIO CREATES AN ONTOLOGICAL SENSE-OF-BEING**

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The radio is the largest used form of electronic media within our world today; nevertheless, it remains the media form least studied by anthropologists (Bessire and Fisher 2013: 364). The history of radio scholarship is wide-ranging and diverse. Early twentieth-century anthropological scholarship looked at radio on a larger cultural scale; endeavouring to understand radio as a way of interpreting the world and exploring the possibilities that were not possible in visual space. The radio was seen as something that spread ideologies by abolishing boundaries and universalising ideas (Arnheim 1936). Radio therefore, has the incredible ability to connect people by transmitting messages on a global scale.

St Andrews Student Radio (STAR) does not have agency on a large cultural scale, therefore a more intimate focus of ethnography is necessary. STAR is a student run broadcasting station founded in 2005 which broadcasts 24/7 over the internet. The station brings together a hugely diverse strata of the university's student body in the broadcasting of shows. The content ranges vastly from shows on news, politics and social issues, to shows of gossip, comedy, films, books and music. I saw the incredible variety and diversity of shows as a revealing representation of the University of St Andrews itself, and of the individuals behind the shows. Presenting a radio show myself, STAR is something very familiar to my life in St Andrews. I therefore believe it would be an interesting point of exploration for my ethnographic encounters project to de-familiarise the familiar.

Within my ethnography, I aim to explore how STAR creates an ontological sense-of-being within the presenters of shows. I utilise Bessire and Fisher's definition of "ontological sense-of-being" from their article *The Anthropology of Radio Fields* (2003). They suggest that it is through the unique capacities of radio, such as its agency, reflexivity, sensory perception, objectification of the senses, the self, and mediation of the social, that this ontological sense-of-being is created.

Within my ethnography I believe it is important to first define my methodology. I will then demonstrate how STAR is a social space which creates an ontological sense-of-being through the agency of the presenters, their interconnection with guests, and the wider community. Finally, I will discuss how STAR empowers and objectifies the individual, creating an ontological sense-of-being.

ENCOUNTERING THE TECHNOLOGICAL WITHIN MY ETHNOGRAPHY

In writing my ethnographic encounter of STAR I wanted to ensure that I encountered the vast diversity of individuals and groups that are part of STAR. Nevertheless, I was aware that studying every show was impossible as I was limited by time and capacity of information. For my ethnography I hence chose four shows that I felt embodied the diversity of the St Andrews student body, while reflecting the different natures and formats of radio shows. These shows included: *I'm Sorry I'm not Stephan Fry*, a female student reading the Harry Potter book series; *ROCKstar*, a rock music appreciation show run by the Rock Society; *St Andrews Woman's Hour*, a topical chat show that seeks to promote women empowerment through political and social discussion and *Sex and the Village*, a gossip show about the personal relationships and sexual encounters of four friends.

Within my fieldwork I utilised two methods of study: participant observation and individual interviews. Within my participant observation I sat in on all four shows and recorded my findings. Within my observations I had clear points of focus: the general content of the show, the presentation and persona of each individual, the interaction between the presenters/guests, the on air/off air dynamic, and the interactions between the show and the public. Afterwards, I would sit and have a casual interview with the presenters that included set questions. These were comprised of questions about the personal history of the individuals and their shows, as well as their perspectives on STAR within St Andrews. I believe applying both these methods of fieldwork proved to be effective. My observations allowed me to have a clear primary understanding of my subjects to formulate my own ideas; while the interviews deepened my analysis by adding the presenter's thoughts, feelings and perspectives relating to STAR.

Furthermore, I made sure to highlight a “reflexive” approach within my ethnography. I believe it is important that I have an awareness of how my own involvement with STAR, as it may shape the observations and conclusions I draw. As such, my participation and observation within the shows may have changed the “normal” social dynamic. Clifford (1988) emphasises the importance of adopting alternatives to literary techniques for obtaining information. This, I believe, was incredibly important to include within my own ethnography due to its technological dynamic. I therefore include voice recordings, podcasts of shows and photos within my ethnography. This approach transcends conventional modes of ethnographic authority, allowing the subjects within my ethnography to have their own voice ‘without explanation or contextualisation: data which is not fully integrated into governing interpretation’ (Clifford 1988: 147).

THE SOCIAL AND MEDIATION OF THE MEDIA

The radio was invented as a form of broadcasting to communicate and send messages. It connects people and therefore is intrinsically linked with the *social*. Berland states that the ‘radio offers listeners a sense of accessibility to and interaction within its own (broadcast) community’ (1990: 188). Within my ethnographic encounter of STAR, I found radio’s sociability was present in two dynamics: between the presenters and guests, and the mediation between the presenters and the listeners. Social interactions create a feeling of togetherness and interconnectivity, empowerment and agency that reinforces an ontological sense-of-being.

From my observations of the shows and discussions with the presenters it became evident that the social interactions between the presenters and their guests were incredibly significant. *Sex in the Village* emphasised the importance of the relationships between them for their show to work and be successful: “We are an ensemble piece. We need each other. The dynamic and interaction between us is important”. Interestingly, they further added that one of their members was not present which changed the dynamic of the show. The radio thus creates a space and time where the presenters can come together; being with one another for them is what creates this ontological sense-of-being. This was further displayed

during the first half of *St Andrews Woman's Hour*, in which the two presenters were alone and the dynamic felt comfortable and familiar for them. However, in the second half they had three guests; a female photographer and two student curators of a local art exhibition. The presenters became significantly more professional, and the social interaction became livelier. One of the presenters stated: "When guests come on you change and act on the vibes they give". Ostensibly having guests on gives presenters a larger agency and empowerment, controlling the conversation with questioning. *St Andrews Woman's Hour* said this interaction gave them fulfilment which alludes to an ontological sense-of-being.

Mazzarella (2004) highlights the importance of the mediation between the local and the media. Within my ethnographic encounter "the local" can be considered the community of show listeners within St Andrews and "the media" STAR student radio. Within my ethnographic encounter I found the mediation between the local and the media was contained through the "Buzzbox". The "Buzzbox" is a social messaging site within STAR that allows listeners to sign in and interact with the presenters on the show. The "Buzzbox" was active in every show I observed. I found it added a new social dynamic between the presenters and the listeners. The listeners would sometimes make comments that were interesting and acted as a catalyst for conversation, or so shocking that they lead to the show being interrupted.

The "Buzzbox" was a significantly important part of *ROCKstar*; Brendan utilised the "Buzzbox" every week to play a game with the listeners. Brendan further suggested that the "Buzzbox" was a way of being aware and perceptive of who is listening. This awareness of listeners I found was highly significant because all presenters stated that they would change if they knew certain people were listening. *St Andrews Woman's Hour* suggested: "Sometimes I do think the listeners can put us off. Sometimes we are dealing with highly controversial issues that I cannot relate to and that makes them hard to discuss. We have to be really careful." Presenters further stated listeners' negative criticism often upset them. This suggests there is strong mediation between the presenters and the listeners' opinions, which are highly influential upon the presenter's ontological sense-of-being.

The listener/presenter relationship seemed most prevalent in *ROCKstar*. This is because the show was a set show created by the ROCK society: “Every year the ROCK society have an AGM and someone is elected” Brendan tells me. He has regular listeners and the majority of them are from the Rock society. With reference to Anderson’s highly influential text *Imagined Communities* (1983) one could view the ROCK society as an imagined community because ‘the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of communion’ (2006: 6). Anderson states technology such as radio ‘created a new form of imagined community’ (2006: 46) because it has the ability to connect people through space and time. Therefore, *ROCKstar* can be interpreted as a space/time of “mediation” between individuals of the ROCK society. The radio therefore creates an ontological sense-of-being because when Brendan’s show is on air the individuals have a larger awareness of other individuals who are part of their society as they become more imaginable: they are connected. This is further supported by the response I got from presenters when asking whether or not their shows reflected their view upon St Andrews. Most presenters agreed, Brendan said: ‘Yes, it reflects my society. Talking about the experiences and inspirations of different members’. This suggests the presenters are continuously connected and mediating with their social environment whilst on the radio, creating an ontological sense-of-being. This is supported by Berland: ‘Radio has unique capacities to map our symbolic and social environment.’ (1990: 191).

INDIVIDUALISM, ESCAPISM AND THE REFLEXIVE SELF

As I have discussed, it is clear that STAR radio is intrinsically linked with the social and it is the social dynamic and mediation between the presenters, guests and wider listening community that creates an ontological sense-of-being. Nevertheless, from my research I discovered that none of the presenters I interviewed believed that STAR had a large social voice or impact within the University of St Andrews. India the presenter of *I’m Sorry I’m not Stephan Fry* stated: ‘the radio is not for the listeners but for the presenters’. This led me to believe that STAR was not merely a social platform for the presenters, but also a place of individualism. This individualism I will discuss through two factors: escapism and the reflexive self.

Although I have discussed how STAR radio is a space for the mediation of the social, it became apparent it was also a space for the individual. Within my interviews I asked the question: “Do you feel like the radio is an escape from your own lives?”. There was a common consensus among the presenters that it was an escape from stresses of everyday realities such as deadlines. The presenters of *St Andrews Woman’s Hour* said: “Yes, for an hour I totally forget what I need to do”. This suggests although there was an awareness of the social, the presenters felt like the radio created distance from reality. Ostensibly the radio therefore becomes a space and time separated for the outside world.

This escapism is further supported by the presenters having “radio personas”. From my observations and interviews, in the context of the radio the presenters seemed to be animated versions of themselves. This was made clear by the distinction between the presenters on air and off air. *Sex in the Village* stated that when they are on air their “personalities magnify”, (as I found mine did); yet when off air they would talk casually. India’s radio persona was interesting because she was herself, yet she animates all the different characters’ voices. When on air there was no break in her concentration or acknowledgement that I was there. She was absorbed into a different world: the world of Harry Potter. Mozzarella states that through media: ‘We “let go” in order to see ourselves differently, to be able to do new things in a reconstituted world’ (2004: 353). This suggests the radio gives individuals freedom and a cathartic sense to “let go”; demonstrating the social connectivity with others was not the only factor important in creating an ontological sense-of-being for the presenters. Rather the radio gave the presenters a space for self-expression, connecting to themselves and their interests. This was further reflected in the content of their shows.

As I have discussed, every show on STAR is different and unique. In interviews with the presenters I inquired whether they thought their shows reflected themselves. *St Andrews Woman’s Hour* replied: “Yes, it definitely reflects us because we talk about issues that are important to us”. *Sex and the Village’s* response was: “It is very personal, we are all best friends”. It was therefore clear that the different content of every show was a way for the presenters to objectify their interests through the medium of the radio. The shows can be seen as a reflection of the presenters themselves; giving radio reflexive qualities. This reflexive quality of the radio, Bessire and Fisher state, “opens each element within this

sensory constellation to reflection: transduction, sound, listening, voicing, time/space, immateriality, the self” (2003: 366). This, they further add, objectifies the senses and implements an ontological sense-of-being.

This reflection of self through radio’s reflexivity was made further apparent to me through the shows advertising. All shows had Facebook pages and the presenters would market their shows. All shows would add a visual aid, such as a picture of them or a gif. In anthropological terms this could be interpreted as the objectification and reification of the individual and their shows. This is supported by Bessire and Fisher who state: “Thus radio, despite its variability, is always already a technology that amplifies a reflexive objectification of the objectifying process itself” (2013: 365). This suggests that through the individual objectifying themselves, they are also being objectified by others. This analysis therefore links back the individuals’ ontological sense-of-being to the social. By objectifying themselves, the presenters gain a sense of empowerment, whilst also connecting themselves to their wider community. This mediation between Self and Other thus creates an ontological sense-of-being.

CONCLUSION

Through my encounters with four radio shows, I have conveyed how STAR radio creates an “ontological sense-of-being”. I have categorised my findings into two sections: the social and the individual. It is clear an “ontological sense-of-being” is intrinsically linked to the social. Firstly, the presenters connected with each other whilst presenting their shows which gave them a sense of empowerment, togetherness and ontological sense-of-being. Having guests on shows implemented a sense of agency and control within the presenters, further inducing this ontological sense-of-being. Social mediation between the presenters and the listeners was further significant; feeling connected to a larger imaginary community that transgresses space and time. Nevertheless, from my research I discovered that none of the presenters I interviewed believed that STAR had a large social voice or impact within the University of St Andrews. STAR is not merely a social platform for the presenters, but also a place for the individual. STAR is a way for individuals to escape from stresses and fears connecting them to themselves, the interests that are important to them and their own ontological sense-of-being. Furthermore, it was evident that the radio is reflexive as presenters suggested their

radio shows were reflections of themselves. This was further reinforced in the marketing of their shows whereby the presenters objectified themselves but were also thus objectified by others creating an “ontological sense-of-being”. This supports Bessire and Fisher (2003) statement that ‘the radio requires people to objectify constantly these very senses, themselves, their worlds, and even the process of mediation anew’ (2003: 373). STAR therefore creates an ontological sense-of-being by creating a distinct space and time, for the reflection of the individual and the connectivity of the social.

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