



Selected Papers of Internet Research 15:
The 15th Annual Meeting of the
Association of Internet Researchers
Daegu, Korea, 22-24 October 2014

VOICING TECHNOLOGICAL OBJECTS ON TWITTER: FROM @big_ben_clock to @SelfAwareROOMBA

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On Twitter, existence is envoiced rather than embodied. Twitter is, moreover, broadly egalitarian in its practices of use—any possessor of a valid email address can register for an account. Voices can be directly articulated by a human, a team of humans, a bot, a combination of bot and human. What does it mean that these different voices, bot and human, individual and organizational, performed and animated, interact together as (basically) equals? I examine a collection of Twitter accounts that voice technological objects ranging from clocks to drones to washing machines to ask: Who are we on Twitter?

In linguistic anthropology, voice is understood as the “linguistic construction of social personae” (Keane 2000:271). It’s the answer to the question of *who* is speaking, with implications about how we regard the origin of the voice, particularly in terms of agency, rights, and identity. On Twitter, different—but often overlapping—types of voices and voicing abound. Thus, we have the heteroglossic voicing of personal self-expression; the scripted voicing of a bot; the audienceed voicing of celebrity; the ventriloquized voicing of an organization; the double voicing of parody; the world-building voicing of a fictional character. Further, this polyphony is actively supported by Twitter’s policy decisions: Twitter eschews real name requirements and offers explicit parody, roleplaying, and critique guidelines to insulate accounts from accusations of impersonation or trademark violation—the only major social media company to do so.

Voice is also a political construct. It’s often claimed that social media platforms “give people a voice”—with the assumption that having a voice equates to political representation or authority or power. Deeply embedded in this are ideas about the sovereignty and importance of public opinion. What kind of public does this diverse envoiced existence on Twitter create? Similarly, voice plays an important role in identity politics. Here, the concept of voice often manifests in terms of claiming one’s “own voice.” This is framed both through assertion of a right to articulate one’s own—or a particular group’s—experience, and through rejection of a model of reality sponsored by more powerful groups. What does the polyphony of voices on Twitter mean in terms of social personae? In terms of social power and authority? In terms of identity and perspective?

Suggested Citation (APA): Johnson, A. (2014, October 22-24). *Voicing technological objects on twitter: from @big_ben_clock to @SelfAwareROOMBA*. Paper presented at Internet Research 15: The 15th Annual Meeting of the Association of Internet Researchers. Daegu, Korea: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

Warner, in discussing publics, suggests that a key element is addressivity—the way participants are addressed and the way they understand themselves as addressed. He suggests that publics are marked by an addressivity that pairs a recognition of both self and strangeness at the same time. In Goffman’s terms, this is a particular kind of participation framework. It is also the basic participation framework for public accounts on Twitter, spread across the different pages of Home, Connect, Discover, and Me. In Warner’s text-based publics, participants are implicitly limited to humans as individual actors able to understand texts. On Twitter, however, participants aren’t subject to these limitations. And how we imagine our fellow participants thus becomes different. I examine the linguistic, participatory, and curatorial choices of Twitter accounts that voice technological objects to investigate how this posthuman, postindividual participation framework affects our understanding of self and strangeness.

Posthumanism and postindividualism have been defined in different ways. Here I draw on Hayles’s work on posthumanism (1999) to focus on a shift away from embodied singular existence to distributed existence that integrates nonhumans and nonindividual entities. This corpus of Twitter accounts offers a unique opportunity to explore how we understand this phenomenon—when we look at how we voice technological objects on Twitter, we see not necessarily how posthuman society *is*, but how we currently *imagine* it and ourselves as members of it. And these imaginings are both responsive and performative, revealing the present and shaping the future.

In this context, I investigate the interaction patterns, profile choices, and text and media variation of accounts that voice technological objects. Further, I pair Warner’s emphasis on addressivity with Benveniste’s articulation of subjectivity as linguistically realized through deictics of time and person to examine the porousness of borders between subjects, objects, and nonpersons. What does the voicing of imagined participants—made visible through animation or performance—reveal about the societies we imagine ourselves members of? About ourselves, our co-participants, and our co-members? Who are “we” on Twitter?

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