

Mobile communication and mediated ritual¹

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Abstract

This paper examines the question of social cohesion as moderated through the use of the mobile phone. The paper looks at this through the lens of sociology where a major theme has been the drive to understand cohesion vis-à-vis technological development. Using Durkheim's notion of ritual and its specification by Goffman and Collins the paper asserts that mobile communication supports cohesion. Using the examples of romantic involvement, gossip, joking/banter and argot the paper examines how cohesion is engendered. Next Licoppe's notion of connected presence is examined in this context. In addition, various quantitative studies are used to also illuminate this point. Finally, there is a discussion of the "optimal" level of social cohesion. In summary, the paper suggests that, perhaps uniquely among ICTs, that the mobile phone fosters cohesion.

Introduction

The question of social cohesion and mobile communication follows in the general tradition of sociology. The discipline arose in the wake of industrialization. The early sociologists were interested in understanding the impact of technology on the social structure.

A simple inventory of social institutions – the family, the church, work, education, the city, gender relations, etc. – shows that none of them were left untouched by industrialization. The family had been an extended version where several generations lived together and had different roles based on age and gender. Industrialization needed a mobile workforce that was not tied to traditional rural locations, but that could live near the factories. Thus, the extended model of the family was often replaced with a more nuclear family of procreation living near the place of work. This transition also saw the rise of the city in its modern form. As opposed to being the location of trade and governance, many cities (for example Manchester in the UK) rose as the locus of the factory. Along with industrialization, the urban population rose and the countryside was left increasingly to the few.

With industrialization, there was the need to educate children for careers that had not existed during previous generations. Rather than learning at the knees of their parents and grandparents, children were increasingly schooled in formal institutions for professions that were different from those of their parents. The rise of the modern school saw the use of individualization and personal tracking. Foucault discusses how the placing of pupils, the tracking of their progress through testing and the development of age based classes (who were isolated from other groups by the architecture of the school) changed the focus and approach to education (Foucault 1977).

In short, industrialization resulted in a major shift in the way that society was organized. The question that naturally arose in this situation was whether we would be able to cohere into social groups given the individualizing tendencies of the new regime.

The social scientist of the time developed a series of concepts to describe this tension. Tönnies suggested *gemeinschaft* characterizing the traditional society and *gesellschaft* as the new (1965). Marx looked at the transition from the feudal to the capitalistic (1995) and Durkheim described the transition from mechanical to organic solidarity (1995) and also traced the impact of social cohesion – or lack thereof – on various groups (Durkheim 1951). Weber examined the increasing rationalization of society in his discussions of bureaucracy and charisma (2002) while Simmel examined "impulse to sociability" (1949).

¹ The correct citation for this article is: Ling, R. 2007. "Mobile communication and mediate ritual." in *Communications in the 21st century* edited by K. Nyiri. Budapest, Hungary.

The sense here is that given the introduction of a deep-seated shift in society, we would be able to peek behind the curtain, as it were, and gain insight into the fundamental forces of society. This was a type of Garfinklian breaching experiment writ large. So many elements were in play and so many institutions were being recalibrated, that by following the resulting realignments we could gain insight into the play of social forces.

The result, following Lash, is that it is neither totally *gemeinschaft* nor *gesellschaft*. There has been a movement away from the traditional, but we have not arrived at a total form of rational, contractual society. There are various remnants of the traditional social order. There are local associations and other forms of traditional society that are jealously guarded. Indeed we agonize over the ebb and flow of these. We cook ethnic food, celebrate local holidays and cultivate various traditional cultures. We are also concerned that we are losing contact with close friends and family.

One of the signs of traditional social integration, for example, is the number of confidants with whom we share our inner thoughts and insights. Following McPherson et al, in the US the number of persons with whom we share on this level has been reduced by about one third between 1985 and 2004. People in the US report that among both kin and non-kin the number of persons with whom they discuss important matters has gone from just under three in 1985 to just over two 19 years later (McPherson *et al.* 2006). This points to the possibility that the drift continues. Putnam, again commenting on the US, also seems to document some of the same. He notes that various forms of association are becoming weaker. The different clubs, associations and forms of social interaction are being confronted by the issues of generational change, isolation in front of the TV set and isolation in the suburbs (Putnam 2000).

Ritual interaction and social cohesion

Given this drift, what is the mechanism allowing for social cohesion, or to use the old Durkheimian question, how is society possible? The answer provided by Durkheim is that it is ritual interaction that allows for the development and maintenance of social cohesion.

Ritual is, in some respects a problematic word. It immediately evokes perhaps the wrong image in the mind of the reader. One of the most common uses of the word is the repetition of a series of actions. It might be brewing coffee, getting the news paper and feeding the cats before reading the news paper in a particular order. In this case it is the process of starting the day that can perhaps be interrupted when there are house guests or can be rearranged when, for example the news paper delivery is late. Taken to its extreme this can be seen as a type of obsessive behavior. In this instance it is the mindless and perhaps obsessive following of a particular set of routines. In this use of the word, the content of the interaction or process is not important; rather it is doing the process that is important. If we take this to its logical end, this type of pathological ritual can include, for example a person repeatedly washing his or her hands, arranging the items on the table in the living room or dressing in a particular order. If this process is interrupted then it can threaten the general psychic balance of the individual. In the words of Dulaney and Fiske:

Rituals often involve washing and other forms of purification, orientation to thresholds and boundaries and colors that have special significance. Rituals tend to involve precise spatial arrays and symmetrical patterns, stereotyped actions, repetitive sequences, rigidly scrupulous adherence to rules (and often the creation of new rules), and imperative measures to prevent harm and protect against immanent dangers. These features typify rituals but they also define a psychiatric illness, obsessive-compulsive disorder (Dulaney and Fiske 1994; see also, for example Franklin et al. 2000).

Freud, for example uses the idea of this “stiff” ritual in his discussion of obsessive-compulsive behavior (Freud 1963; Bell 1997, 13).

This is not the sense of ritual used here, nor was it the sense used by Durkheim when considering the development of social cohesion. When thinking of ritual vis-à-vis social cohesion, it is useful to think of it as a type of catalyst (Ling forthcoming). In the tradition of Durkheim and Goffman, ritual is a process wherein individuals come together and in the context of the moment, progressively drop the

barriers to interaction. In this process they come to a mutual sense of the moment and in this way they establish a bond that, in future interactions, can be drawn upon. This comes through in Durkheim's the well cited paragraph.

By themselves, individual consciousnesses are actually closed to one another, and they can communicate only by means of signs in which their inner states come to express themselves. For the communication that is opening up between them to end in a communion – that is, in the fusion of all the individual feelings into a common one – the signs that express those feelings must come together in one single resultant. The appearance of this resultant notifies individuals that they are in unison and brings home to them their moral unity. It is by shouting the same cry, saying the same words, and performing the same action in regard to the same object that they arrive at and experience agreement (Durkheim 1995, 231-232).

The basic process of cohesion is that individuals come together in some sort of a setting. In that context they become conscious of one another and, this is the important part, they become mutually aware of each other's engagement in the situation. If it is a concert, they note one another moving to the beat. If it is a religious service, they see one another reacting to the liturgy. If it is a political rally they might cheer and applaud to similar points being made, etc. Through the mutual engagement in the situation, a barrier to interaction is removed and a link is established. The development of the bond takes place in a specific context and the ritual is the catalyst. The specific link perhaps needs to be developed and elaborated. It might not be enough that two people like similar music or agree in a particular political perspective. It is, however, a start.

Durkheim based his work on the use of ritual among Australian Aborigines. He suggested that their periodic ritual interactions were the mechanism through which social cohesion was developed and maintained. Following from Durkheim's notion of ritual there are at least two traditions that have developed. One of these is that of Turner who saw ritual as a liminal event. That is, the ritual takes place in a unique setting where the individuals are asked to transcend a barrier (Turner 1969; see also Bell 1997). A typical version of this is the coming of age ceremony or a membership ceremony where the individuals who are to move from one status to another are put into a context that is different from their daily situation, they receive various truths and perhaps they must take various tests and endure different trials. Following this they emerge as reconstituted individuals with a different status and new insight.

The second tradition, that which will be examined here, moves in a different direction. In the analysis done by Durkheim as well as that of Turner there is sense that the persons being exposed to the ritual and those who are engineering it are two separate groups. There are the priests, the rock stars or the politicians who are responsible for the actual staging of the event. The people who will be transformed or who will generate the cohesion are not involved in the staging. Rather, they are to be awed by it.

Goffman and also Randall Collins follow a different tradition, and it is indeed this line of thought that can be applied to the use of the mobile telephone. Goffman, and the people who follow in his tradition, see the individuals as responsible for both the staging and the participation in the ritual interactions. Goffman took the Durkheimian idea of the ritual and scaled it down to cover everyday interaction. Rather than being some sort of a well choreographed event, Goffman saw rituals in many mundane activities. It was through the use of these small scale individually authored interaction rituals that we cobble together our everyday sense of social order. In his paper *On deference and demeanor* he writes:

In this paper I have suggested that Durkheimian notions about primitive religion can be translated into concepts of deference and demeanor, and that these concepts help us to grasp some aspects of urban secular living. The implication is that in one sense this secular world is not as irreligious as we think. Many gods have been done away with, but the individual himself might stubbornly remain as a deity of considerable importance. He walks with some dignity and is the recipient of many little offerings. He is jealous of the worship due him, yet, approached in the right spirit, he is ready to forgive those who may have offended him. Because of their status relative to his, some persons will find him contaminating while others will find they contaminate him, in either case finding that they must treat him with ritual care. Perhaps the individual is so viable a god because he can actually understand the ceremonial signifi-

cance of the way he is treated, and quite on his own can respond dramatically to what is proffered him. In contacts between such deities there is no need for middlemen; each of these gods is able to serve as his own priest. (Goffman 1967, 95)

It is through the observation of deference towards others and the care of our own demeanor that we are able to build up and mind our social interactions. It is through these mundane interactions that social cohesion is developed and preserved. We do this through giving and receiving the appropriated greetings for the situation. We do this through telling the right jokes and laughing at the jokes that others tell. We do this through participating with the appropriate tenor in exchanging gossip, etc. Collins noted:

For Goffman, every fleeting encounter is a little social order, a shared reality constructed by solidarity rituals which mark its entering and closing through formal gestures of greeting and departure, and by the little marks of respect which idealize selves and occasions (Collins 1998, 22).

To draw these lines together then, a core issue in modern society is the impact of ICTs on our sense of social cohesion. This is nothing new since this has been a point of interest in sociology since its inception. One line of thought with regards the development of social cohesion is that it often arises in the execution of ritual interaction. Ritual, in this sense, is a mutually connection between individuals based on their exposure to a common event. The Durkheimian sense was often that some persons had responsibility for the actual staging of the ritual while others were participants. Goffman and Collins refocused this to suggest that everyday interaction – including mediated interaction as I will suggest – can also be seen in this context. The assertion in this paper is that mobile communication is a phenomenon that has the potential to assist in the development of social cohesion.

The rise of mobile communication

Mobile communication has diffused into society at a rate that is unprecedented. On a world basis, the number of mobile phones rose 24% between 2000 and 2005. According to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), there was about one telephone subscription for every third person in the world (2005).² At the same time there were about half as many who had access to the internet (ITU 2005). The highest adoption rates are found in Europe where there are approximately 82 subscriptions per 100 persons. In Oceania (Australia, New Zealand, etc.) there are 69, and in the Americas there are 52 subscriptions per 100 persons. Following this Asia had 22 subscriptions per 100 and Africa had 11.

While the adoption rate in Europe has leveled off, there is an almost Klondike like atmosphere in many other countries. The growth rates in India and China are far above 50% per year. In addition, growth in sub-Saharan Africa often tops 100% and sometimes even 200% per year.³ Thus, in the last decade, we have seen the widespread adoption of a new form of communication.

One of the unique aspects of mobile communication is that it changes the locus of interaction. When thinking of landline telephony, we call to specific locations. The metaphor is that we call to a person's home, their work or to some other physical location in the hopes that the individual is someplace nearby. Woody Allen played on this in his film *Play it again, Sam*, when the self-important character Dick left detailed list of numbers with his calling service telling where he could be reached:

Dick: I'll be at 362-9296 for a while; then I'll be at 648-0024 for about fifteen minutes; then I'll be at 525-0420; and then I'll be home, at 621-4598. Yeah, right George, bye-bye.

Linda: There's a phone booth on the corner. You want me to run downstairs and get the number? You'll be passing it.

² There are about 2.2 billion GSM/3GSM connections. On a world basis about 83% of all connections used this standard and the rest used the U.S. based CDMA standard (GSM World 2007).

³ Some of this is a statistical slight of hand. If there are only a small number of phones in a particular country, it is relatively easy to have large increases percentage wise.

The advent of mobile telephony has taken the edge off this gag. Rather, than calling to a series of places to contact someone, we simply call him or her directly.⁴

Another issue is that, in most cases, the mobile telephone is not a shared object, rather it is privately held. In addition to allowing a personal channel of interaction, it also contains many bits of private information such as call records, saved text messages, telephone numbers of intimates, photos that are more or less revealing (Prøitz 2005) and other traces of our private life (Andersen 2006).

Mobile communication and mediated ritual

This new channel of interaction allows more nuanced forms of micro-coordination (Ling and Yttri 2002). It provides us with various forms of safety and security (Ling 2004; Baron and Ling forthcoming) as well a different types of phatic interaction (Ling 2005b).

In short, the mobile telephone allows us to elaborate and develop cohesion that is often generated in copresent situations. This is not to say that relationships can be founded and developed in the absence of copresent interaction. While there are examples of friendships and “communities” that have been fostered and developed exclusively via mediated interaction dating all the way back to telegraphy (Standage 1998), for all practical purposes social interaction needs copresent interaction in order to coalesce into a cohesive form, this process can be aided through the use of mediated interaction.

Thinking, for example of romantic relationships, the meeting of individuals, their wooing and the development of a common sense of involvement is largely a copresent activity. Following the discussion above, it is also a heavily ritualized interaction. There is the need to come into contact and there is the need to engender a mutually recognized sense of the relationship. The couple goes through a series of stages as they enter into a more intense and intimate sense of their coupled status (Ling 2000). Much of the process has to do with the mapping of common interests and the development of a mutual sense of trust. The assembly of the group, the use of “tie signs” (Goffman 1971) the establishment of a mutual focus of attention, the development of a common argot or set of symbols and the building of a barrier to outsiders are all parts of founding an intimate relationship (Collins 2004, 193; Berger and Kellner 1964).

Mediated interaction, and in particular interaction via the mobile telephone is an obvious channel of communication that can be drawn into this work. In survey material from Norway, for example we see that in an interestingly asymmetric finding that 50% of teen girls and 32% of teen boys reported that they had flirted on a weekly basis via the mobile telephone.⁵ This finding underscores the role of the mobile phone in this process. Indeed the mobile telephone is well designed for the purpose. It is a technology of the individual. It allows for the communication of both synchronous and asynchronous messages directly between the concerned individuals and these messages need not be observed by others.⁶

During the establishment of the relationship the mobile telephone provides a channel through which the interests of the individuals can be mapped and the intensity of the nascent relationship can be explored. This might include simple information regarding which type of music they like or the timing of their next assignment. It might also include risqué “pick up” lines and perhaps the exchange of pro-

⁴ Goffman also describes a sight gag that plays on the fixed location of a telephone when he writes about a person making a “call” on a toy telephone found in a trash can. The person makes a false conversation that plays on the notion that, at the time of his work, telephone calls were made from home, and office or at best from a telephone booth. The idea of making a call while being on the open street was patently absurd and thus there was comic potential in the situation (Goffman 1981, 86 n. 6).

⁵ $\chi^2(6) = 13.68$, sig. = 0.033 based on a survey of 1000 persons who were randomly selected from the Norwegian population in 2002.

⁶ . Indeed, mediation has long been a part of what Prøitz calls “love projects” (2006). The telegraph, (Standage 1998, 134 - 136), the landline phone (Fischer 1992, 234; Marvin 1988, 67 - 68) and in contemporary society the mobile phone (Byrne and Findlay 2004; Ellwood-Clayton 2003; Fortunati and Manganeli 2002; Habuchi 2005; Kim 2002; Ling 2004; Prøitz 2006; Solis 2007) have also had a role in these situations.

vocative or quasi-provocative photos. This contact, along with copresent interaction play into each other as the couple moves toward the establishment of a coupled identity.

After the relationship becomes *de facto*, the mobile telephone serves another purpose, namely a channel for phatic interaction. In the case of teen couples who do not live together, the mobile phone provides a medium through which they can exchange endearments at strategic times through the day. In particular, it is common to hear of such exchanges as they prepare to sleep (Ling forthcoming; Ito 2005; Ito and Okabe 2006). Messages wishing one another “G’nite” or “Nite, I love you”.⁷ Thus the mediated interaction keeps alive the link between the partners. Often it is not the specific words of the text message or content of the call that are important, but rather the process of communicating. The failure to keep this channel alive can have tragic consequences.

The mobile phone can also extend the interaction between lovers. Ito and Okabe report on how teens in Tokyo prepare for a date by exchanging text messages in anticipation of the actual event. They text one another when they are done with work or school, and about the progress of their preparations their negotiation of the transport system and their impending arrival at the agreed upon location for the “flesh meeting.” Again, after the date as they part, there is a new round of messages recapping the events of the evening and embroidering their time together with various commentaries. This interaction continues until they are in bed at their respective homes ready to sleep (Ito and Okabe 2005).

At one level this type of hybrid interaction can lead us to wonder when the date actually starts and ends. The actual interaction and anticipation is not limited to actual copresence. Rather it gets played out over a much longer time period. There is a real rhythm to their interaction. There is the sharing of feelings and there is the generation of excitement. It is easy to see that the time when the two are actually together is the core of the event. It is not, however the only aspect of the episode. The lead up to the physical meeting and the regression to their own separate homes is also used to interact and develop their sense of paired identity. This interaction fulfills the Goffmanian notion of ritual. Further, the ability to facilitate direct interpersonal contact means that the mobile phone plays a convenient role in this type of interaction.

The illustration here used the interaction between lovers. Mobile communication also facilitates other forms of interpersonal interaction. The fact that the mobile telephone is a personal device means that we have lowered the threshold to with one another. This means that a part of the ritual world can become mediated. Various forms of greeting one another, the use of argot in text messages, various forms of repartee and even gossip serve to illustrate how we use the device to engage one another in Goffmanian interaction rituals (Ling forthcoming). In these rituals we are at the work of developing social cohesion with one another.

Connected presence

Another issue with the mobile phone is that it lowers the threshold for interaction. The French sociologist Christian Licoppe has examined this and suggested that the mobile telephone supports what he calls connected presence (Licoppe 2004). According to Licoppe, in the previous telephonic regime – that associated with landline telephony – we observed a different tempo in our interaction. In the era of landline telephony friends would perhaps call on a weekly or semi-weekly basis in order to have a longer chat. They might go through the week and save up large and small events in anticipation of the call. Some of them would be reported in the call and others would be forgotten in the flux of the call. The point is that the call was an event in itself.

With the rise of mobile communication, Licoppe suggests that we have gone from the pattern of seldom, but longer conversations to shorter and impulsive calls and messages. Rather than “save up” episodes that we relate to one another in a longer interaction, we call when the urge strikes us. These calls need not be long conversations; they are only to check up and to touch bases. In the process, however, Licoppe states that there is a different type of connection that is developed.

⁷ These come from a sample of text messages gathered in a survey of 2003 randomly selected Norwegians. The messages were collected in 2002. A total of 882 SMS messages from 463 (23%) of the respondents were collected.

Commenting on the same phenomena, and in particular in reference to texting, Ito and Okabe note:

These messages define a social setting that is substantially different from direct interpersonal interaction characteristic of a voice call, text chat, or face-to-face one-on-one interaction. These messages are predicated on the sense of *ambient accessibility*, a shared virtual space that is generally available between a few friends or with a loved one. They do not require a deliberate opening of a channel of communication but are based on the expectation that one is in 'earshot.' . . . As a technosocial system . . . people experience a sense of persistent social space constituted through the periodic exchange of text messages. These messages also define a space of peripheral background awareness that is midway between direct interaction and non-interaction" (Ito and Okabe 2005, 264)

Thus there is the suggestion that mobile communication facilitates social interaction. The general idea is that mobile communication actually generates social cohesion and thus is somewhat unique in the annals of techno-social interaction. As noted above, industrialism had ravaging effects on existing social structures. Many other technologies such as the automobile (Flink 2001), TV (Putnam 2000) and possibly even the internet (Kraut *et al.* 1998) have had the opposite effect. It is interesting to note the possibility that the mobile telephone may be a technology that goes against the current.

Social cohesion fostered by mobile communication

The assertion that mobile communication fosters cohesion seems to be borne out in several studies that are now emerging. Material from Norway, for example shows that both the frequency of both voice and SMS communication varies with teens' sense of inclusion in their peer group (Ling 2005a). Material from Korea finds some of the same. According to Kim, the mobile telephone supports the development and maintenance of ties with friends and family (2006). Moving to Japan Matsuda (2005, 127) found somewhat the same. In that work, the use of mobile communication was found to be connected with familial and friendship interaction. Smoreda and Thomas examined the use of mobile communication in a nine country European study. Their analysis shows that there was a particularly strong correlation between use and participation in friendship circles (Smoreda and Thomas 2001, 5). Looking to Sub-Saharan Africa, Donner reports that while there is a strong entrepreneurial flavor to mobile phone use there, it is also often used to enhance communication within the family (2005).

The drift of these analyses is that the mobile phone renders the intimate sphere. Rather than facilitating a broad pool of friends and acquaintances, the strong point of the device is that it facilitates interaction within the familiar group. Basing her analysis on material from France, Chantal de Gournay suggests that the mobile phone encourages the scaling down of diffuse social relationships into a group of relatively close friends (2002). This is similar to Matsuda's "full time intimate sphere" (2005, 133) and what Habuchi calls the tele-cocoon.

The *keitai* (mobile phone) can serve as a means of maintaining existing relationships when it is used to strengthen ongoing collective social bonds. *Keitai* do not allow entry of strangers into such collective cocoons. [. . .] There is a zone of intimacy in which people can continually maintain their relationships with others who they already encountered without being restricted by geography and time; I call this a tele-cocoon (Habuchi 2005, 167).

Looking specifically at texting, there is also some of the same tenor to the analysis. Castells *et al.* (2004, 152) say that texting acts as a catalyst the development of peer groups. The work of Miyata (2006), Igarashi *et al.* (2005) as well as that of Reid and Reid (2004) indicate that use of texting covaries with participation in smaller and tighter social groups. This is also found in the work by Ishii who notes that "mobile mail [texting] appears to support only a closed network, whereas PC e-mail was found to promote friendship with distant friends" (Ishii 2006, 360).

By way of explanation Ito and Okabe say:

What is unique about mobile text chat is the way it is keyed to presence in different physical spaces. We observed mobile text chat in diverse settings: home, classrooms, and public transportation. Like internet chat and voice calls, mobile text chat can be used whenever two parties decide to engage in focused 'conversation.' What is unique to mobile text chat, however, is

that it is particularly amenable to filling even small communication voids, gaps in the day where one is not making interpersonal contact with others. . . (Ito and Okabe 2005, 263).

The general sense is that mobile communication supports interaction within the small intimate group. As outlined above, it supports and extends our ability to engage in ritual interaction. While there is a strong need for copresent interaction in order to maintain the group, mobile communication extends this possibility beyond the here and now. It allows us to exchange bits of gossip, to banter and to flirt when the opportunity presents itself.

Bounded solidarity

The final question to be addressed here is to examine how this type enhanced in-group interaction will play out in broader social interaction. The material in the previous section seems to point to a society where there are stronger in-group ties. While it may be jarring to experience others who use their phones in our presence, this interaction is positive for the integration of their social clique. When given the choice of talking with an acquaintance or a stranger at the local bus stop, it is perhaps not odd that others choose to talk with a near friend or flirt with a lover.

Rather than establishing what Granovetter (1973) called weak-ties, they are nurturing the strong ties. While this is a positive thing in some respect, it also raises other questions. Weak ties are important in society as the route for important types of information and new influences (Granovetter 1973; Burt *et al.* 1998; Burt 2000; Burt 2001). It is through these weak ties that we find information on eventual jobs, the location of entertainment and innovations. If the mobile telephone is refocusing our attention inward within the group then we run the danger of missing out on these broader impulses (Gergen 2005).

One aspect of this bounded solidarity is that it also supports the development of local ideologies. These ideologies are the ownership of the group and they can be used to justify the preference of group ideas and privilege over that of other groups and other persons who are not a part of the privileged circle. Putnam describes this as the balkanization of society (2000) and Portes discusses the over configuration of strong ties as being similar to the functioning of the mafia (1998). There is a sense that the over elaboration of mobile communication can have an impact in this direction.

There are, of course many other impulses that counteract the development of bounded groups. The impact of the internet, chat groups and normal social interaction will generally expose the individual to a broad spectrum of ideas. It is, nonetheless a trend that bears examination.

Conclusion

This paper started by digging back into the history of sociology and suggesting that the discipline has been concerned with the interaction between technological development from its inception. Following from the work of Durkheim, the glue holding society together is ritual interaction. This insight has been further refined by Goffman and Collins in that it applies not only to the broad choreographed rituals described by Durkheim, but that it also applies to interpersonally arranged interaction.

The core assertion of this paper is that mobile communication has allowed for the development of this type of interaction beyond copresent situations. We are starting to use mobile communication to tie our family or our peer group together in new ways. We use this communications medium to interlace interaction within the group into our everyday activities. To use the apt phrase of Katz and Aakhus, there is perpetual contact (2002).

On the positive side, this integrates the group in ways that were not possible before. Through the reapplication of various types of social interaction to mediated form – flirting, gossip, joking and repartee and argot – the intimate sphere extends its ability to generate social cohesion. This can result in a more tightly integrated group and it can also result in the development of a certain group based élan. There is also the potential for the development of what I term bounded solidarity where the strong internal bonds are privileged at the expense of the weaker social bonds. The former portion of this assertion – the strengthening of internal bonds – has been found in empirical work. The latter portion of the assertion is more speculative but bears examination.

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