

What would Durkheim have thought?: Living in (and with) the information society¹

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Introduction

I am interested in discussing the interaction between mobile communication and society. I want to consider the impact of mobile communication on the sense of social cohesion. This has been an issue that I have been thinking about for some time now. I have participated in various projects that have considered issues associated with this (Ling 2004) and have written a book that goes into this issue at some length (Ling forthcoming).

I am going to start with a little bit broader net however. I first want to discuss the interaction between technology and society. This may seem, at once vast and also somewhat cliché. It is, after all, a very common theme for those of us who have taken an interest in this area of society.

Revolution, evolution or what?

The interaction between technology and society is the core of sociology. Those of you who are not sociologists will, I hope, excuse me for the folly of going through this short intellectual history. It is, however, important for me to lay my cards out for all to see.

The current discussion with regards the role of technology in society is, in some ways an updated version of the traditional sociological project. When thinking about the founding of sociology, a theme that ran through the work of, for example, Weber, Durkheim, Tönnies, Simmel, Marx, Compt and the others, is the impact of industrialization on the social fabric. These scholars, each in their own way, dealt with this central issue. These early social scientists were confronted with the reformulation of major social institutions. If we think of a simple list of major institutions such as the family, the church, the city, education and working life, the industrial revolution (both the transition to steam and the later transition to electrical production) witnessed dramatic changes in these institutions. The family has moved from being an extended multi generational-affair to today's nuclear Mom, Dad and the kids form. The church lost much of its influence, the cities ballooned, education was professionalized and democratized and we moved squarely into wage based labor. The traditional *gemeinschaft* society was nearly completely transformed into *gesellschaft* society, to use the dichotomy suggested by Tönnies.

Today when confronted with the new information and communication technologies (ICTs), we are, in some respects, also engaged in the same issue. There has been the introduction of a new technology into society. We as social scientists have the privilege and perhaps the responsibility of keeping an eye on it. What are the social impacts of ICT? It is important to try to understand how these technologies are being played out vis-à-vis the broader social situation. Are the Internet and the mobile telephone changing social institutions? Will they change the way we work, the form of the family, the way we educate ourselves and the rest? Will they change our sense of social cohesion and the way that power is applied and distributed in society?

We are still working through this. Enticing evidence comes from the Philippines where mobile communication has affected the way that government works. This has been one of the most dramatic events associated with the adoption and use of ICT. It is, however, not the only one, as I will discuss below.

Stepping back for a moment, however, it is worth pondering whether the so-called ICT revolution is of the same magnitude as the previous steam based industrial revolution? Has the development of the transistor in 1947 by Shockley, Bardeen and Brattain had the same impact as the perfection of the steam engine by Watt in the 1760's? Have the PC and the mobile telephone had the same broad impact on society? As with the industrial

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revolution, has the family been reformulated? Has the city nature of the city changed to the same degree as it did during the introduction of the factory system? Has the nature of our wage-labor form of work changed in any significant way? Does the educational system operate much differently than it did 100 years ago? Has the influence of the church increased or decreased in any appreciable way?

If I were to stand in the year 1907 and pose these questions of the previous 100 or 150 years, I would be able to answer yes in almost every case. However, if I stand in 2007 and pose the same questions of the previous century, the answer is not so clear.

My point is here is not to deny that ICTs have had an impact. Rather the point is to put the issue into some sort of perspective. While we are past the worst portions of internet mania, we do not have to reach too far into the past in order to find the most brazen rhetoric describing the possibilities associated with the introduction of this technology. Perhaps my favorite is Masuda who suggests that the internet will, “crystallize participatory democracy and result in a rich symbiosis of god and man, without the compulsion of power or law but by the voluntary co-operation of citizens” (Masuda in Kumar 1995, 15). These comments, if true, would swamp anything that happened in the previous industrial revolution. However, time and a little sober thought has given another answer.

ICTs have undoubtedly changed the way that we operate, but they are definitely not of the same caliber as industrialization. They have change forms of production and access to information. They have allowed us to control manufacturing processes and the way that we deal with manner of information related tasks. They have led to the elimination of certain types of work and replaced with others. We no longer, for example, have filing secretaries, but rather we have web designers. I no longer spend hours digging through my tax forms with a puzzled look as I shift back and forth between forms and instructions. Rather I receive a rather completely filled out version and then I nervously shift back and forth between web pages, print outs and the suggested version of my taxes.

An interesting perspective on all this is provided by James Beniger in his book *The control revolution* (1986). According to Beniger, we have not really experienced an information revolution. Rather the increasing demand for control of ever more complex systems has resulted in a parallel, but perhaps somewhat lagged development of information systems. In the period between about 1880 and 1920 many of the elements of the current control apparatus were in place. He notes, for example, that WWI was characterized by central planning to a degree that had not been seen before. WWII was in this respect a redux. The advent of the transistor, seen in this perspective is a new step in the process and not the fundamental shift that some would have it to be.

Thus, the current era is not so much a revolution as a phase in the development of industrialization. Following Beniger, ICTs have taken on a life of their own, but they are still operating in the same general context. I go through this review of the situation not to dampen our spirits. I think that there are important changes in society that are stirring. However, it is important that we focus on the right things. Rather than being given the luxury of a broad Weberian analysis, we have to be a bit more cagy in our analyses.

The interaction between technology and society

You will notice that I have constantly described technology and society as having an interaction. I have been actively sidestepping the question of which came first, technology or society.

The idea of technical determinism suggests that in the final analysis it is technology that drives the formation of society. Marx is often seen through this lens. His statement that “A windmill gives you society with a feudal lord; a steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist” (2005, 119) does a good job of encapsulating the notion that it is technology that determines the form of social interaction, at least at an abstract level. Others who have employed this perspective include Munford and his examination of mechanical time keeping (1963), Cottrell and his analysis of diesel locomotives (1945), Sharp’s analysis of the introduction of steel to Australian aborigines (Sharp 1952). In some respects, Eisenstein’s examination of the printing press (1979) as well as Beniger’s examination of the control revolution (1986) also fit into this camp. The image here is of technology begetting technology and society being continually reformulated in the wake of this process.

At the other end of the spectrum, there is the idea of social determinism. This has been perhaps most completely explored by Bijker, et al. (1987; 1992). From this perspective, it is social interaction that has agency when considering the development of tools. Further, various tools, while originally intended to function in one particular way, they can be reinterpreted. The shovel, for example is intended as a tool with which to dig holes, but we can also use the handle as a lever, we can “plant” the shovel in the ground and use it as a pole to hold up a line and use can use it to lean on, etc. While the shovel functions best when digging holes, it can also have a range of other, more or less jury rigged functions. Some technologies are particularly closed in that they are difficult to reinterpret and to use in other instances while some are particularly open. ICTs are particularly open. The original intention of electronic computers was to do the heavy mathematical work of calculating cannon shell trajec-

tories etc. In addition, they found a life in assisting bureaucracies in their work of sorting through large data bases. All of this has spun into PCs that can host World of Warcraft sessions and allow us to search the Internet for fondue recipes or assistance in arranging flowers. In a similar way Shin Dong Kim describes using the mobile phone as both a type of communications device, but also as a clock, a calculator and as a flashlight (Kim 2004). Since that time, we have added music player, camera and a host of other functions to the device.

Social determinism suggests that technologies are a type of text where the author/inventor/manufacturer produces an artifact with a certain intention but that this is “read” and interpreted by the users. The intentions of the author have a bearing on the use of the object, but the user can interpret and redefine the artifact far beyond the original intentions of the designers or the producers.

The weaknesses with both approaches are clear. The technical deterministic view assumes that technology has somehow resulted in a type of technical procreation wherein there is little social intervention. There is not the sense that the technology arises in a particular social situation for particular purposes. The social deterministic approach also has its questionable assumptions. While there are intended uses, social determinism perhaps suggests that there is malleability with technology that is not really there.

The real problem comes, however when there is the discussion of primacy. Which came first? Was it the tool/machine or the social determination of a need? Every time I start to think about this, I get into an endlessly regressing loop. It is a little like trying to decide how many angels can dance on the head (or more correctly the point) of a pin. The discussion of technical/social primacy has a tendency to be our age’s version of the meta-



Figure 1: Is it best to focus on the stone, the water or the turbulence of their interaction?

physical conundrums that Thomas Aquinas pondered in his book *Summa Theologica*. Trying to decide if technology results in society or if the action of society causes technology is a hopeless activity. Perhaps it is something that I can take up as I progress into my dotage and when I have the time to pursue hopeless crusades.

As I have alluded to above, the important question for me is not which causes what. The real question is what is the interaction between technology and society? It is here that I like to draw on the metaphor of the stream and the stone (hence my inclusion of the photo). If I conceive of society as a type of flow like the water in a stream that is confronted with different barriers such as

stones, I have a different sense of the situation. Rather than trying to decide which came first, the water or the stones, I concentrate on the turbulence that is caused by the interaction between the two.

Please do not misread me. I am not saying that geology or hydrology are not important and that they do not have important discussions. I am aware of the discussions in geomorphology with regards alluvial action etc. I am only drawing a metaphor for trying to understand the role of technology in society that I fear has been sidelined as we pursue ultimate causality.

If we look at the interaction between the stone and the water, we can see that the flow of the water is disturbed when it meets a stone. It is the different ebbs, turbulence and maelstroms (or mælstrøms to use the correct Norwegian) that are of interest. They are the thing that is worth looking at. While it is interesting to ponder where the stones came from and the cycle of the water etc., trying to decide primacy does not get us too far in understanding the turbulence. Understanding the turbulence means that we need to take for granted that both are present and that there is an interaction between them.

Moving out of the metaphorical world of stones and water into the world of technology and society, it is far more interesting to examine the way we make sense out of the ebbs, turbulence and mælstrøms when the flux of society meets the solidity of a new technology.

The domestication approach has been particularly fruitful in this context (Silverstone *et al.* 1992; Haddon 2003). There are three general questions that this approach raises. These are first, what characterizes the adoption process at the personal level, second after adoption has taken place how does the object or service become integrated in our daily lives and finally, how is the object or service interpreted by others after it has been adopted? In each case, there is the assumption that both technology and society are present. Thus, the focus is on their interaction and not primogeniture.

Looking at the first of these, domestication theory examines how the individual goes through the process of discovering the technology and further how they evaluate the process of whether the technology will fit into the flux of their life. They might see it displayed in a store, or they might receive the recommendation of a friend. Regardless of where the exposure comes from, the individual then matches that mental image of the technology

with their personal needs and goes through some mental process of checking to see if the artifact is indeed something that is worthy of purchase or acquisition.

Next, the domestication approach encourages us to look at how the individual actually brings the artifact into their life. Where is it kept and how must other objects and routines be changed in order to accommodate the new item? Will the new object or service require a reapportionment of time or money? When we bring a TV, a PC, or the Internet into our homes, it means that we have to rearrange the way we move through the home, we have to rearrange the furniture; we have to allocate our time in a different way.

Indeed, the adoption of a technology may clash with the very structure of the home. In figure 2 we see the arrangement of furniture in a Norwegian apartment from the mid 1980's. The apartment was built in the early 1960's before it was common to have a TV in the home. Since that time, a TV has become an almost ubiquitous feature of the living room. Indeed, we can see the TV drawn into the upper left-hand side of the figure facing a curved sofa with a low table in front of it and another chair to the left of that. This arrangement is in conflict with the original sense of the living room. This can be seen most obviously, in that the TV blocks a doorway into one of the home's bedrooms.

This is an example of the turbulence when a newer technology is placed into a pre-existing situation. Provisions have to be made in the physical arrangement of the living space. Compromises in the aesthetics of the home are tolerated given the perceived benefits of the technology. This picture may, in the eyes of the architect, be a travesty against his or her art. In the eyes of the people living there, it is simply making the best of the current situation. The woman living here might have dreams of moving to a home with a larger living room or perhaps a TV room. This would perhaps allow here to pursue her interest in the piano that we can see to the left in the drawing. Further, the man might have plans of tearing down a wall after the kids have left in order to better accommodate the TV. In each case, the fact that they have a TV makes demands on the arrangement of the living room and the

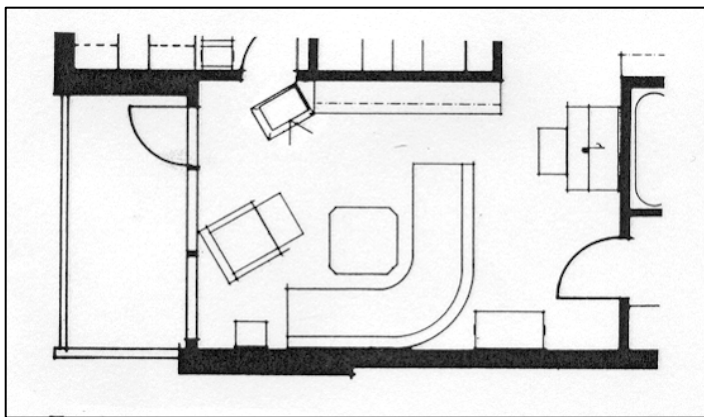


Figure 2: The furnishing of a Norwegian living room from the 1980's

type of furniture that is found there. The ownership of the TV and its role in everyday life directs how they think of interior decorating. It also is an element in determining when other activities can be pursued. This illustration helps us to understand that the adoption and use of technology needs to be worked into both the physical and the temporal routines of everyday life. Further, as noted by Haddon, it is not a "one off" situation (2003). The placement, timing and style of use change and develop with time.

Finally, the domestication approach asks us to understand how the object or service will be interpreted by others in the owner's social sphere. The intentions of the individual

for obtaining the artifact may well be seen differently by friends and colleagues. The purchase of the latest mobile phone might be seen as a thinly veiled gambit to gain status or the subscription to an internet service may be in the eyes of friends, an indication that the individual is finally becoming a part of the 21st century.

The project of the domestication approach is to examine how the adoption of technologies and services interact with various social structures. How do we proceed through the decision to purchase or not purchase the artifact? Once it is a part of our personal sphere, how does it impact on our routines and the structure of our daily lives and then finally, when it we use the object or service as a part of our presentation of self, how do other make sense of this presentation.

There is nary a whiff of social vs. technical primacy here. There is little concern as whether it is the technical chicken or the social egg that comes first. Both are taken as given. The thing that is important is the interaction between the two. Coming back to the metaphor of the stone in the water, it is of little relevance where the stone or the water came from. In the first instance, it is important to take the local micro situation into account. What are the specific formulations of status, routine, structuring, etc. Does the placement of the PC in the home clash with our sense of aesthetics? What is important is to understand the interaction between the two and to make sense of the turbulence when they meet.

What is the result of all this turbulence?

Let me now look at this in terms of mobile communication. When we talk of ICTs it has largely been synonymous with the PC and the internet. Mobile telephony has often been treated as an interesting footnote. The mobile telephone has followed somewhat the same path as its ancestor the landline phone. In the case of the landline phone, aside from a few hardy souls such as de Sola Pool and Claude Fischer, there was little academic interest, particularly when thinking in terms of the social dimensions of the device.

The mobile telephone has enjoyed a somewhat better academic reception. Jim Katz, Leopoldina Fortunati, Kristof Nyiri, Lana Rakow and several other persons have shown an early interest and there is an active group of younger scholars such as Scott Campbell, Jonathan Donner, Fernando Paragas, Nicola Doering. But the field is still relatively open. This is good news for me since it has provided me with an academic roost.

The adoption of mobile communication has also happened almost literally before our very eyes. The technological developments took place at different points in the 1900s. Radio communication was developed in the period immediately before and after the First World War. The cellular approach to mobile communication came from the late 1940's and 1950's and the development of, for example GSM came in the 1980's. Further, developments in battery technology and miniaturization in the last 10 – 15 years have given us the incomparably small and multi-functional mobile phones that we have today. In addition to all this, the development of pre-paid subscriptions and a variety of other subscription forms have made the mobile telephone accessible to people in a way that the internet and the PC can not match.

The social impact of all this is that unprecedented numbers of individuals own and use mobile telephones around the world. According to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) there was about one mobile telephone for every third person in the world (ITU 2005). There were about 82 subscriptions for each 100 persons in Europe, followed by Oceania with 69 and the Americas with 52 subscriptions per 100 persons. Asia had 22 and Africa 11 subscriptions per 100 population. About half as many persons had access to the internet in 2005. This is almost to be expected since internet access is far more complicated to set up and requires the purchase of far more expensive equipment.

Thinking about subscription type, as of January 2007, there were 2.2 billion GSM/3GSM subscriptions. That is, about eight of every ten subscriptions was a GSM subscription. The remaining were largely the U.S. based CDMA standard (GSM World 2007).

In the year 2005, The Philippines was number 16 in the world when thinking of the absolute number of mobile phone subscriptions and there were subscriptions that represented about 40% of the population.

What do we use the mobile telephone for? We clearly see its use among teens in their various affairs and allurements. In addition, we see it when we are forced to overhear the people at the next table or the next bus seat gabbing away in what is to our ears, a meaningless flow of jabber.

Another answer to this question is that we use mobile phones to communicate with each other. While there is the development of PC and internet-like services via the mobile telephone, the vast majority of revenue comes from people simply talking to each other. Only a few percent of our pesos, or kroner or dollars are spent on data services via the mobile telephone. The vast majority of money is spent in order to engage in inter-personal interaction, be it texting or talking. Indeed, this follows the pattern of other forms of mediation (Oldyko 2000). The thing that people are willing to pay for is interpersonal communication.

There are several general themes associated with the use of the mobile phone. These include safety and security, coordination and expressive interaction. The first of these, safety and security, is often cited as the reason that a mobile phone is purchased. In discussions with users it often comes out that they first become users are a result of having to face some situation in which the ability to contact others would have saved the day. Perhaps they got a flat tire, perhaps one of their relatives is sick and there is the need to stay in touch, perhaps they need to stay in touch with the kids at home, etc. In some situations, there was real peril and in others, it is only an imagined possibility. I recall standing in line at a grocery store in the late 1990's where in addition to food it was possible to buy a mobile phone. The fellow in front of me was making just such a purchase. I asked him about it and his response was that he needed to have it because he liked to spend time at his cottage. The message here was that the device was being purchased under the banner of security and safety. I hope that he never had to use it in that errand. Nonetheless, it was rationalization that he used when purchasing the device.

Once purchased the mobile telephone has its most important role as a way to coordinate interaction. The major impact of the mobile telephone is that it makes each of us individually addressable. Instead of calling to a location on the chance that a person will be somewhere nearby, we call directly to the individual. Indeed, we are

sometimes miffed when our intended interlocutor does not answer their phone. As we are individually addressable, whenever and wherever we find ourselves, there is a new world of coordination. In other places, I have called this micro-coordination (2002). That is, we now have an extremely nuanced way of interacting. We can call (or text) from the store to find out if a recipe calls for milk or cream. We can contact a spouse who is en route and request that they make a detour in order to, for example, get the kids. Mobile phone equipped children can call when they are done with activities and thus parents do not show up way too early or too late in their role as taxi drivers or soccer parents. Finally, the mobile telephone softens our schedules in that we can call ahead to advise others we are running late. There are obviously limits to all this. We can not call to the airlines and say we are running late and would they mind holding the flight a few minutes? Clearly, this type of interaction only functions within the small group and not necessarily in the interaction between the individual and larger social institutions.

Mobile communication and social cohesion

The adoption by teens, the reliance on the device for safety and security and using the mobile phone to coordinate interaction are the first things that we see when discussing the social consequences of this development. These uses are what we might call the primary social impacts. Taking a step back we are also starting to see traces of broader social impacts. Specifically, the mobile phone is playing into the way that we develop and maintain social cohesion.

This is a rather broad assertion. In other places, I have asserted that the mobile telephone is that one ICT that is contributing to social cohesion. Again, a broad assertion. I will try to back it up with some indication as to how this is happening. In order to do this I will take a short detour through some sociological history.

I assert that the mobile phone is a device through which we carry out social rituals. Here I am not talking about ritual in the sense of a repeated, or perhaps obsessive type of action done without reflection. I am talking about the notion of ritual as developed by Durkheim (1995) and further developed by Goffman (1959; 1967) and Collins (1998; 2004). According to this line of thought, a ritual is an interaction between people where there the individuals have a mutual recognition of a shared mood. Durkheim writes:

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).

Thus, ritual is an element in what Simmel would call sociation (1910-11). It includes the recognition of a common focus and the engendering of a commonly recognized mood. In this way, it is the catalyst for social cohesion. In this sense of the word, ritual is not the a thoughtlessly repetitive interaction rather it is a way in which individuals come together, create and maintain a sense of social cohesion.

Durkheim studied – at far remove – the role of ritual among the Aborigines in Australia. His emphasis was on their occasional gatherings and how they were used to integrate the group. Goffman took much of the Durkheimian perspective, stripped out the religious context and reapplied it to interpersonal interaction in everyday life. At the conclusion of his essay 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 so irreligious as we think. Many gods have been done away with, but the individual himself might stubbornly remains 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 significance 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).

Goffman takes the broader notion of ritual and reduces it down to the level of everyday interaction. In Goffman, there is not the broad sweep of what we might call managed rituals. Rather there are rituals of greeting and departure. There is the ritual of telling a joke or exchanging gossip. There is the ritual of flirting and there is the

ritual of disagreeing. There are the little marks of respect and forms of interaction that are carried out between individuals. The focus here is not on the collective as much as it is on interpersonal interaction. In the words of Collins “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).

Thus, the assertion here is that social cohesion arises from ritual interaction, be it at the large Durkheimian or at the more micro Goffmanian level. In the former case, the individual is exposed to some process that is arranged and directed by others and may involve what Turner calls a liminal transition (1969). In the latter case of Goffmanian interaction, it is the individuals who stand in as both the producers and the participant of the interaction. In both cases, the essence of the interaction ritual is the same. It is the mutual recognition of a common mood in a bounded group. This is induced through the development of a sense of inclusion – and necessarily an exclusion of those who are outside the circle.

The issue that is left open here is the degree to which this form of interaction can be mediated. Durkheim was operating in a world that was almost exclusively face-to-face. Indeed, the groups that he studied were not particularly aware of either telegraphic or telephonic interaction. The point, of course was to examine how their colocated interaction resulted in their sense of solidarity. Goffman worked in an era where telephony was well established, but it was not the general focus of his work. In several places, he invites the reader to focus their attention on “situations” by which he generally means physically copresent interaction (Goffman 1959, 238). In spite of this, there are several occasions where Goffman begins to examine the possibility of staging interaction via – or in spite of – the telephone. Perhaps most intriguingly he refers to the use of telephony in his signature concept of front and back stage. He suggests that telephony was an activity to be carried out in the backstage area. He writes, “Here [in the back stage area] devices such as the telephone are sequestered so that they can be used “privately” (Goffman 1959, 112). Finally, Collins is quite consistent in his assertion that ritual interaction is by definition a copresent activity (Collins 2004, 78).

I am of a different opinion. While the idea of interaction ritual has been developed with the thought that it is a copresent phenomena, I assert that mediated interaction, and in particular interaction that is mediated via the mobile telephone, supports and extends the way that we experience ritual interaction. I am not so radical so as to assert that mediated interaction will take over as the primary avenue through which we develop and cultivate our social sphere. It is clear that in the most cases we meet and nurture our social contacts in face-to-face interaction. At the same time, it is also clear that we can extend the form of interaction via the use of mobile communication. We can tell jokes, we can gossip and we can use various forms of slang in mediated interaction. In the use of these devices, we are fulfilling the notion of ritual described here. When successful, these mediated forms of interaction engage the individuals and provide them with a forum in which they can engage in their ritual interaction. There is the sense of mutual engagement and the development of a common mood. Thus, I assert that we can look at mobile communication as a technology that supports and even helps to develop social cohesion.

One other example of mediated social interaction is the area of romantic involvements. This area of interaction shows particularly well how the interplay of copresent and mediated interaction can be used to fulfill love’s purposes. While there are examples of people who meet and court via the internet – or for that matter the telegraph (Standage 1998) – these are the exceptions. In the vast majority of cases, star-crossed lovers meet in copresent situations (Ling 2000). Mediation technology, and in particular the personal technology of the mobile telephone, allows us to draw out and also to anticipate the copresent interaction with mediated contact. Indeed material gathered by Ellwood-Clayton in the Philippines found many of these forces at work. She provides us with the following bit of texting dialogue between a woman named Leticia and a man named Captain.

Leticia: Does it mak u hapy 2 stel a kiss? Remember tho shalt not stel, best to ask!

Captain: I kno wen 2 do it

Leticia: Com show me how so I myt also

Captain: Jaz lyk a magician... I nevr reveal a secret...

Leticia: (sent a message with the graphic of a dancing bear)

Captain: wers my kiss?

Leticia: Y dnt u cum n get it? Latr, im nt yet going 2 bed. I’s stil her at d prayer meetn, prayn 4 you...

Captain: Ur not praun. Ur thnkn of me (Ellwood-Clayton 2003, 233).

When thinking of the Durkheimian form of ritual interaction, this is a doubly interesting sequence. While Leticia is ostensibly engaged in a church service, that is, a situation where normally the rules of ritual inclusion are rather strong, she also finds the space to carry out a Goffmanian interaction that belies this angelic façade. While

the context of one ritual interaction that is intended to cultivate her sense of sanctity and more to the point here, cultivate here inclusion in the fellowship of the congregation, she is also using the time to negotiate another connection. In each case, but perhaps the latter more than the former, she is working out a mutually recognized sense of the situation and cultivating a common mood.

In the case of Leticia and Captain, we see the way that mobile communication fosters the development of social cohesion. Mobile communication is a medium through which these two are working out their eventual relationship. Indeed there is starting to be abundant research showing that mobile communication supports interaction in the immediate social sphere. It is within the context of family and friends that mobile communication has its greatest impact.

Mobile communication and the strengthening of the primary group

Up to this point, I have been speaking in qualitative terms regarding the potential of mobile communication to engage our sense of local solidarity. There is, however a more quantitative side to this analysis. From around the world there are starting to be analyses showing that mobile communication tightens the strong bonds inside the near sphere of friends and family.

Citing nobody less than Manuel Castells, we can note that that small primary groups are often born in copresent interaction, but that that they are reinforced via wireless communication (Castells *et al.* 2004, 249; see also Smoreda and Thomas 2001; de Gournay and Smoreda 2003; Harper 2003). This gives us a model where the group mints their form of argot and interaction while together, but they are also free to elaborate them and play on their consequences in mediated interaction (Campbell and Russo 2003, 329).

In my own analyses in Norway, I also find that as teens increase their use of the mobile phone they report using more time with their friends, less time at home and are less likely to report being “lonely” (Ling 2005; see also Koivusilta *et al.* 2005; Punamaki *et al.* 2006). Looking at material examined in from Korea by Kim *et al.*, (2006), by Wei and Lo in Taiwan (2006), by Smoreda and Thomas in Europe (2001), and in separate studies by Matsuda (2005), Dobashi (2005) in Japan, the same general picture emerges. Mobile communication tightens bonds in the primary group. Indeed, we can also look at the work of Donner in Africa where he found in more qualitative terms that in addition to its entrepreneurial functions, the mobile phone is used to enhance in-group communication (2005). According to Ishii working in Japan, “mobile mail [texting] appears to support only a closed network, whereas PC e-mail was found to promote friendship with distant friends” (2006, 360).

Turning a good phrase, Matsuda calls this the “full time intimate sphere” (2005, 133) and Habuchi calls it 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 telecocoon (Habuchi 2005, 167).

When thinking more specifically about the role of texting, there are also studies showing that it tilts the interaction in favor of the smaller in-group. Reid and Reid, for example note that preference for texting corresponds to a preference for smaller tighter social groups (Reid and Reid 2004). They write that “Texters were more likely to text a particular group opposed to many groups, and more frequently participated in several simultaneous text conversations, findings which taken together reinforce the idea that texters share interconnections within a close group of friends in perpetual text contact with one another” (2004, 5). Using data from the US, Campbell and Kwak have examined this in terms of the geographical dimension finding that both texting as well as voice interaction predict informal socializing for those who live within a 25 mile radius. Again, this supports the idea that texting is useful when it comes to connecting local peer groups (Campbell and Kwak 2007).

This quick tour of the world points out that in a variety of locations using separately collected data the conclusion seems to be arising that mobile communication supports cohesion in the primary group. Ito and Okabe note:

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 French sociologist Christian Licoppe has examined this and suggests a contrast between a style of interaction between friends that is interrupted with longer interludes to what he calls connected presence. In the traditional form of interaction friends perhaps meet once a week and have a long chat on different topics that they have perhaps saved up for the special session. In the mode of connected presence, there is a very low threshold for initiating interaction. We have a communications device that allows us to contact those whom we are near on seemingly the least provocation. Licoppe asserts that rather than saving up our thoughts and comments until we meet a friend on, perhaps, the week-end, we can establish contact on an ongoing basis. There is no need to wait. If, for example we see a pair of shoes in a window display that our friend has been searching for, we can send a text message without delay. This might be enough to start a sequence of comments on other topics and perhaps eventually a call. Rather than seeing the interaction between friends and family as a series of intense interactions interrupted by time, Licoppe suggests that we look at these interactions as a type of ongoing conversation. That is, he encourages us to see this as connected presence. Indeed, as we saw above, in the case of Leticia and Capitan, the boredom of attending a church service was enough to encourage their string of enticing messages.

There is, yet another layer to all of this, that being the local ideology of the group. There is perhaps the suggestion that the solidarity of the group arises simply under the weight of increased communication. This more mechanical approach would suggest that solidarity of the group comes from the increased ability to interact.

There are, however, other forces afoot. The argument of mediated ritual interaction suggests that solidarity also has other dimensions. It is not simply the number of interactions, but the solidarity is also dependent on the development of a common ethos. Within the small group the various types of ritual interaction help to develop solidarity. This is transformed into a type of local ideology.

An ideology has two basic components in this context. First, it needs some sort of load bearing construction and second it needs to be more or less continually updated with new episodes that support its general framework. The ideology of the teen peer group might have a general tenant that, for example, "Fathers are jerks." This forms the framework upon which various daily events can be placed. If one girl is not allowed to go to a party because of parental concerns, this becomes a brick in the larger edifice of fathers being jerks. If a certain boy friend meets a cold response or if a swing in the adolescent fashion pendulum results in parental incredulity these can be noted in terms of the broader ideology, "Fathers are jerks." The ideology makes the various daily trials comprehensible for the adherents of the ideology. Another ideology might be that soccer is fun or that Ronaldo is the best player. In each case, the broader ideology needs to be more or less continually supported with new events that play in the same direction. There can be much effort given to collection. If, however, there are not enough events to support the broader ideology, it will likely wither and die. If the group does not agree as to the general ideology, or if enough arguments against the ideology arise, it will need to be modified if the group is to benefit from it.

The mobile communication facilitates the development and maintenance of these ideologies. It is a medium through which these can be developed, but more importantly, it is a way that the supporting events can be quickly broadcast to the group.

At several levels then the mobile telephone supports the inner ecology of the small group. It is a device that allows us to extend the reach of ritual interaction. It allows for what Licoppe calls connected presence and, it helps us to cultivate the local ideologies that form support the social cohesion developed in our interactions with others. The research that supports this general picture is starting to be reported.

Bounded solidarity

Given this ability to be in perpetual contact – to borrow a well turned phrase of Katz and Aakhus (2002) – it becomes easy to see how the mobile telephone favors the primary group of friends and family. Seen in this way, the various quantitative results noted above become more understandable. The model is that via the use of the mobile telephone we have enhanced access to one another and that this tightens the bonds within the group. These bonds, in turn, help to encourage the development of a local ideology that also contributes to the strength of these ties.

An interesting question is brought up by Portes in his analysis of social capital (1998). In some cases, he asserts that the internal bonds of the group are over configured. He cites, for example, participation in the mafia. Others have looked at the over configuration of local groups and the corresponding paucity of weak links as, for example, enforcing poverty (Putnam 2000). The point is that the over configuration strong ties and the corresponding absence of weak links has implications for the functioning of the group (Granovetter 1973; Burt 2001). The group does not enjoy the advantage of the types of information that these ties might provide. It is not the primary group, for example that will give the individual information about a new job, an introduction to a potential new

partner or give them insight into the advantages of a new innovation. In the absence of this information the group exists in a form of isolation or balkanization in the words of Putnam (2000).

In order for the group to have a vital inner life, there needs to be a sense of cohesion and trust that is also supported by their own local ideology. At the same time if the inner bonds become too massive, the group closes itself off to other influences in society and is impoverished on various ways. The teen clique that is more taken with its own inner ecology than with the broader society is perhaps the best example of this. A clique exists in a sense of bounded solidarity where the inner flux of events is so central so as to deprive them of the influences that come from weaker links.

The logical conclusion of mobile telephone use in society pushes in the direction of bounded solidarity. However, it is not clear that the clique is allowed to exist in a form of splendid isolation. There are other forces in society that push in the direction of more openness. These include the natural malleability of the group as individuals come and go and as the different phases of the day, week and year demand that the individual be included in alternative social circles. In addition, there are other forms of mediation that seem to broaden, or perhaps make more superficial, our social intercourse. These include, for example the internet and instant messaging. Online gaming, for example, exposes the individual to a broad mix of virtual connections. Instant messaging is often seen as the locus of less central friends and acquaintances. Thus, while mobile communication can easily be seen as the technology of bounded solidarity, there are other countervailing tendencies at work.

What is our role as social scientists?

In this final bit, I want to pull back from the specific discussion of social cohesion and mobile communication and try to say a few things concerning the role of the social scientists in all of this. In the introduction, I noted that we are, in some ways, facing the updated version of the traditional sociological project. In some ways, we are going about the same task as that which concerned Weber, Durkheim, Tönnies, Simmel, Marx, Compt and all the rest.

When seen in this way, it perhaps clarifies our role in all this. In addition, it might also serve as a call to action. What we need is reports from the front. We need to be out there observing these changes as they happen. This is our only chance to do this and it is important work. I am afraid that in Norway, the opportunity to examine the transition to mobile telephone access is ending. The children of today can not remember a society without mobile phones. It has always been there for them. Thus, if we are to be the Durkheims and Webers of our age, we need to be quick about it. In addition, if we are to be the Durkheim's and the Webers of our age, we need to be good at observing what is afoot out there.

The questions are obvious. What is happening to social cohesion? How does the internet or mobile communication play into other institutions? Which is reforming which and what are the cross-cultural differences? What are the good, the bad and the ugly sides of all this and how are the power relations being played out here? It is clear that there is enough to keep us occupied into our dotage and more importantly, it is noble and important work.

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