Mobile Communication and the New Insularity

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New technologies arrive in wrappings of great promise. The new software promises greater processing speed, the latest television a sharper picture, the new car less engine noise, and so on. We are drawn to the pleasures of such promises. However, the cost/benefit analysis from which we proceed at the point of possible ownership is typically limited. How much money will it cost to acquire more processing speed, a sharper image, and so on? Seldom do we ask the broader questions regarding our lives, our relationships, and our culture. What will be the repercussions of our choices for our quality of life and those around us? Only within recent decades have scholars turned concerted attention to the societal transformations facilitated by the ever-increasing appetite for technological "progress". The critical and cultural analysis of television opened the door to a broad domain of significant scholarship. More recent analysis has turned to the impact of the internet.

Mobile communication is now on the horizon of critical scrutiny (see especially, Katz, 2008). In part the relative inattention to date may derive from the fact that mobile phones may seem but a minor technological improvement. As it might appear, they simply sustain the traditional telephonic process, but without the bother of line-locked instruments. Yet, we can scarcely afford a dismissive attitude in this

matter. Mobile phones are now used by over a billion people world wide, and the growth curve is steadily increasing[1]. As the Katz and Aakhus (2002) compendium makes clear, the mobile phone is subtly insinuating itself into the capillaries of every-day interchange, altering our forms of life, and bringing about new possibilities in its wake.

In the present offering I wish to focus on the reverberations of mobile communication, and most particularly the mobile phone[2]. First, I will examine the role of mobile phone usage in bringing about transformations in communal life. Here I will introduce the metaphor of the *floating world*, which will facilitate an understanding of a new form of communal life made possible by the mobile phone. As I will propose, the creation of floating worlds generates a new form of insularity. It is not an insularity of individuals, of organizations, or nations, but an informal, micro-social fragmentation. I will then consider some implications of this insularity for the socio-political landscape. As I will propose, cell phone technology may effectively reduce political engagement. However, where political issues are highly salient, it may serve to both harden political divisions and reduce potentials for dialogue.

Community in Transit: The New Floating Worlds

In earlier work (Gergen, 2001) I proposed that many of the major technologies of the 20th century functioned corrosively with respect to the traditional, face-to-face community. Traditional communities are geographically defined (e.g. "my neighborhood") and can be characterized in terms of their high degree of stability, reiterative communication, shared beliefs and values, mutual understanding and support, and shared knowledge about the participants. With the advent of the radio, the automobile, rapid transit, mass publishing, television,

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[1] *Herald Tribune*, Feb. 24, 2003, p. 8.

[2] This is to recognize that the social processes facilitated by the mobile phone may not be identical – and indeed could be antithetical – to those favored by laptops, citizen band radio, the walkman, etc.

jet transportation, and the internet in particular, the traditional community was placed in jeopardy. All of these technologies functioned to remove individuals from their location within the local community. Such removals were both physical (through mass transportation, jet transportation, etc.) and psychological (through radio, television, the internet, etc.). As workers became increasingly mobile, executives became increasingly global, and the activities of mothers and children were more widely dispersed (supermarkets, district schools, after-school activities), the population of active and available neighbors was substantially reduced. Many neighborhoods today approximate ghost towns; virtually none of the denizens are physically present.

One of my favorite illustrations is furnished by my wife, who grew up in a small community in Minnesota. The houses on her street typically featured a screened-in back porch, and in the summer families would often take their meals in the cool of the porch. As the meal was completed and talk continued, there was frequent "visiting". Neighbors from one household would come over to share the news, laugh and commiserate. However, as national radio broadcasts became increasingly effective as vehicles for entertainment, the visiting was reduced. The television comedians, singers, and actors were far more entertaining than the neighbors. With the entry of television, air conditioning and the TV tray, back porch dining became a rarity. It was far more comfortable to sit in a climate-controlled room and eat while watching television. When we recently returned to "the old neighbourhood," and talked to the residents now living in the family home, we found they scarcely knew their next door neighbors.

Community dissolution is matched as well by the demise of its heart: the nuclear family. In many homes in the US there are multiple televisions in the house – so that family members can maximize individual choice. There are also alluring possibilities for the children to live private lives in their tech-furnished bedrooms – CD players, computer games, telephone, amplified guitar, etc. There is often a family computer as well, with high competition among family members for internet access. To be sure, the family may all be physically present in the same dwelling. However, psychologically speaking, they are living separately.

It in this context that the mobile phone is of unusual importance. It is almost unique as a technology of communal restoration. It offers the possibility for continuous and instantaneous reconnection of participants within face-to-face groups. Within a brief moment, relationships are re-enlivened, common opinions and values shared, expressions of support and mutual understanding exchanged, and knowledge of each other deepened. In a Bakhtinian (1981) sense, while most of the broadly shared technologies are *centrifugal* in their effects, disrupting and dispersing conventional systems of meaning, the mobile phone tends to function *centripetally*. It restores communality and secures it more steadfastly. More broadly, it may be said, that the mobile phone has lent itself to the pervasive state of an *absent presence*, the continuous presence of family, friends and colleagues who are physically absent (Gergen, 2002).

Yet, this restoration of community deserves closer examination. For it is clear that we are not witnessing here a re-flowering of the traditional face-to-face community. Rather, to borrow a descriptive phrase from 19th century Japan, we are witnessing the emergence of a "floating world". As in the Japanese case, it is a world of social interchange that escapes the control of government and military/police authority. People are free to speak of all matters great and small, regardless of whether they are lovers exchanging sighs of longing, family members arranging a rendezvous, or drug dealers negotiating sales. And, except for a significant number of business travellers, it also resembles the floating world of Edo, Japan, in its functioning around an axis of petty pleasure. In large degree, mobile communication is informal, un-scripted, and used in ways that enhance the pleasures of relationship (e.g. romance, friendship, family life, colleagueship). Lovers or spouses may call each other several times a day, using justifications that seem only to mask the enjoyment that is their aim. As Puro (2002) has described Finnish mobile phone users, they seem to "create an obligation for talk without a reason for a talk" (p. 27). In this sense, the cell phone community is largely an expression of what the Japanese call, *ukiyo-e*, the more worldly but less enduring pleasures of life. Finally, as in the Japanese case, there is no stable center of communal life. There is no specific geographical location or membership group to which the concept of community can

be attached. The community is always there in a potential state, brought into being only in those moments when two or more participants are in communication.

Yet, the floating world of mobile phone users is also significantly different from the Japanese case. Most importantly, the floating world of informal life in Edo, Japan was literally "grounded". That is, the creation of community was always spatially circumscribed – by tea house, Geisha quarters, baths, brothels, gardens, and so on. And these arenas were limited to the Tokyo metropolitan area. Yet, the floating world of the mobile phone user is approaching the point of geographic irrelevance. Its participants may be almost anywhere at any time. Like the hovercraft or the pneumatic rail system, they are elevated from the physical terrain; there is no specific location with which they can be identified[3].

As we find, we have dwelling about us, at all times, small communities that are unseen and unidentifiable. Only their manifestations are apparent; as we stroll the thoroughfare or sip coffee in a cafe their presence is constantly made known to us. Each mobile phone conversation is a sign of a significant social nucleus, stretching in all directions, amorphous and protean. We cannot reach out to touch the nucleus, behold it directly, or interrogate it. And yet, for those nearby, it may lie somewhere toward the center of importance – guiding virtually all their actions.

The new floating worlds differ in another significant respect. Whereas the floating worlds of Tokyo were loosely connected, the new forms of relationship often represent tightly knit micro-communities. The ways in which mobile phone communication enhances and sustains group connection has been the subject of broad commentary. For example, Ling and Yttri (2002) describe the way in which the cell phone enhances "micro-coordination," the capacity of people within the circle to adjust their actions to each other and move together harmoniously as a unit. There is also the use of the phone in what they term, "hyper-coordination," or the integration of the group in terms of emotional

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[3] See also Sommer (2002).

expressions and self-definitions. As Gournay (2002) describes it, the mobile phone moves us toward "fusional" relationships, in which "the inner circle" is vitally strengthened. As Fortunati (2002) puts it, the mobile phone is "a strong booster of intimacy among those within the social network of the user" (p. 51). With continuous communication, those within the circle can develop a high degree of mutual trust and support.

It is also important to note that the new floating worlds are nicely adapted to the demands of life in a highly complex, rapidly moving, high tech society[4]. This is so first because participants can rapidly obtain information from those within the circle as the demands of the day (or night) unfold. One can obtain directions, advice, support, and the confidence of shared opinions and values. Or, if one suddenly learns or recalls information useful to anyone else in the circle, this can rapidly be transmitted. Highly important to many is also the increased degree of safety afforded by the mobile phone. If traveling in an insecure region, concerned about signs of danger, or caught in pressing circumstances (e.g. automobile mishap, air cancellation, unwanted visitor), there are instant companions available. In certain respects the mobile phone functions as a symbolic talisman. Threats of evil are kept at a safe distance.

The style of mobile phone talk is also consistent with its uses in negotiating complexity. Mobile phone conversation is seldom lengthy or labyrinthine. Messages are often brief and to the point. There are few explorations of "deep feelings" or complex ideas; rather, the subject matter is often superficial and easily communicated[5]. Because the participants' attention is often divided between the conversation and the immediate environment, there is less temptation to "go into difficult matters". Here too, participant voices may be raised to a high volume in order to overcome background interference. Simplicity is also

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[4] See, for example, Law and Peng (2008) on the way in which migrant workers sustain familial connections while abroad.

[5] See also Gournay (2002) on the simplification of the formal structure of language when speaking on the mobile phone.

demanded by the absence of back-channeling; highly nuanced phrasing and body language cannot be effectively interpreted. The new floating worlds differ from the characteristics Ong (1982) ascribed to early oral cultures. In contrast to oral cultures, there are no long stories, or oracular authority. In the mediated oral culture of today one moves toward superficial, sound-bite relationships.

Floating Worlds and the New Insularity

If such bonded, informal and transient communities are becoming increasingly pervasive, how are we to understand the repercussions? What are the political and cultural implications of such movement? In my view, there is no singular set of outcomes resulting from the emergence of the new floating worlds. As with any technology, the mobile phone may be taken up and used by people for purposes never imagined by their founders. However, there is one broad and potentially important implication of cell-phone technology that deserves attention. My particular concern is with the micro-segmentation of society. As proposed, most of the communication technologies emerging within the past century have the effect of dissolving the local, face-to-face community. However, in this case we have a new form of insularity. The islands are not the lone individuals, no longer tied to communities, but small social nuclei, linked by continuous communication.

Here it is important to consider the social implications of perpetual contact: As people coordinate words and actions together, so do they come to create meaningful worlds. Realities are constructed, values developed and "good reasons" come into being (Gergen, 1994). Locally fashioned assumptions are transformed into "obvious realities," and for those sharing such assumptions they may appear universal in application. While the process of world construction is embedded within all social interchange, it is most effective in small, dialogically engaged relationships such as those invited by mobile communication. As a result of the constant contact, there is a *crystallization of reality and value*.

It is here that we may locate a process of *circular affirmation*, that is, a form of interchange in which participants continuously affirm each

others' views and values. As Turkle (2008) has put it, the participants use each other for self-validation. As two persons within a network share with other, and they with still others, there is a point at which the early agreements come full circle. Shared views continue to re-circulate, generating continuous and largely unchallenged affirmation. With the increased sophistication of camera-phones, visual supports can further fortify such affirmation (Scifo, 2005). As research indicates, for example, mobile phone images focus on locally appreciated subjects, such as family members, friends, self, pets and travels (Okabe and Ito, 2004; Kindberg et al. 2004).

On a more subtle level, such in-group communication tends to generate an *alienation through objectification*. By this I mean that in the act of speaking about others not present, they become objects of discernment and deliberation. When one shares a space of understanding with another, the participants cannot easily address each other in terms that are unintelligible to the relationship itself. They cannot step outside the relationship to evaluate it in ways not understood by their compatriots. As the participants enter other relationships, however, their intimates can be evaluated in alien terms. In Buber's (1923) sense, they are not addressed as *thou*, a style reserved for intimate exchanges within a shared reality. Rather, they are "spoken about," and as a result become an *it*, objects to be evaluated as separate from the exchange in which one is participating. For example, when seated at the dinner table, one generally speaks within the common traditions of the family. A teenager does not, for example, typically evaluate his father's profession. However, with his cell-companions, he may describe the foibles of all his family members. They are now objects under scrutiny.

As I am proposing, cell phone technology favors the solidification of in-group realities and loyalties. Close-knit groups are drawn even more tightly together (Kosinken, 2007). As a result there is withdrawal from participation in local, face-to-face communities. The individual may move through the day relatively disengaged from those about him or her, as physically absent participants in the favored cluster are immanently present. (This may indeed be an important reason that cell-phone users invite the antagonism and scorn of bystanders). As the

small group consumes an increasing proportion of communication time, issues that are not inherent to group interests lose salience. To paraphrase, "what is important to you is not important to us"[6]. Or, in Gournay's (2002) terms, "We are seeing a desire for closure of the relational network, reduced to a few close friends and the family core" (p. 23).

We have long had societal schisms based on class, race, religion, and ethnicity. Gender and sexual preferences have more recently joined the mix. However, there are important ways in which the mobile phone alters the character of social division. In particular it moves the site of inter-group tension from large-scale demographics to micro-social relationships, from schisms in macro-cultural politics to micro-cultural mores.

We have a technology that creates a shared sense of "we as opposed to them" and ultimately, "we as better than them". Such a view is presaged by Anderson's (1983) classic account of the contribution of print technology to the formation of the shared view of "we as nation". As the same language is circulated among people, actions are coordinated around this language, trust is developed, dissenting voices are eliminated, and others are identified as "outside" the circle. As outsiders are increasingly disparaged, we approach pervasive conditions of alienation and conflict.

Civil Society and Political Engagement

As political scholars have long maintained, between the national government and the individual voter there is (or should be) a domain of face-to-face relationships in which issues of common political concern can be debated. This is the domain of civil society, lodged within the micro-social processes of communication (e.g. Seligman, 1995;

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[6] One important reason by-standers resent mobile phone use in their presence is that it identifies the user as "wedded to others". One's personal significance is eroded. By the same token, if another gives you their mobile phone number it often functions as an indication bonding.

Goldsmith, 2002; Ehrenberg, 1999). Participation in civil society is not only important in generating independent deliberation about political issues, enabling expressions of resistance, inviting independent initiatives, and mobilizing organized expression. In addition, civil society is to serve as a prophylactic against the raw pursuit of individual self-interest. Participation in the dialogues of the common good should balance the desire for individual benefit. In contemporary terms, the pursuit of individual rights would be tempered by a concern with duties to community.

In recent decades, cultural commentators have become increasingly concerned with the erosion of local, face-to-face communities. Sennett (1974) bemoans the loss of those bonds of association and mutual commitment out of which community is forged. For Bellah (1985) and his colleagues, individualist ideology promotes a me-first orientation to social life, with a resulting lack of interest in community participation. Or, as one might say, the grounding of democracy in the freedom of the individual mind is set against the very kind of civic engagement necessary for effective democracy. With the publication of Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (2002), the loss of civic participation became a matter of broad debate. As Putnam demonstrates, over a broad number of indicators, voluntary communal participation has undergone decline.

As proposed above, cell phone technology does invite the restoration of communal participation. However, this is not a participation in civil society as advocated by political theorists. On mobile phones people focus primarily on issues relevant to the small group as opposed to the larger community or the society as a whole (Kindberg et al., 2004). As ventured above, we are witnessing a shift from civil society to monadic clusters of close relationships. In my view, this creation of monadic clusters is having two substantial effects on democratic process. Two important trajectories in political participation are especially favored. First there is *political detachment*. In many monads the dominant issues concern the immediate lives of the participants themselves. The cell phone is used primarily for the micro-coordination of social or family life, for social and emotional support, for enhancing the participants' safety, and sharing experiences. In effect,

communication functions to sustain the life of the group itself. Under these conditions, life outside the group recedes in significance. Issues of political concern, unless they immediately affect the lives of the participants, dwindle in importance. Supporting this view, Sugiyama and Katz (2003) explored the relationship between mobile phone use among university students, and participation in civil society. As their data indicated participation in volunteer work and in political activities both receded with increased use of the mobile phone. Those who never used these technologies were most engaged in civil society. Ancillary data also showed that increased reliance on the mobile phone was associated with high frequency of socializing with friends. In effect, when friendship is central, issues unrelated to friendship recede in importance.

One could scarcely suppose that mobile communication is substantially subtracting from political participation. Cultural patterns are always complex and varied and we must consider a second trajectory invited by mobile communication*, dialogic disruption*. In particular, let us consider monadic groups in which political concern is intense. The participants are actively engaged in sharing opinions and information concerning political issues. Here again we must consider the tendency toward circular affirmation. To the extent that participants in these monadic groups tend toward mutual affirmation, there will be a resulting resistance to interfering or opposing ideas. One is rewarded for bringing to the group news and information that supports the dominant opinion. Deliberation on opposing ideas is replaced by tendencies toward consensus. When there is opposition, the tendency toward internal affirmation is only intensified. Those outside the group are viewed with disregard or contempt. In effect, the flows of political communication essential for viable democracy are interrupted[7]. Dialogue communication between groups gives way to monologue within groups. The animosity so pervasive in contemporary elections may stand as a case in point.

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[7] For more on the implications for democratic structure of society, see Gergen (2008).

Uncertainty and Edgework

My attempt in this offering has been to tease out some of the more subtle but profound transformations in cultural life accompanying the proliferation of mobile communication. At the outset, I proposed that the mobile phone facilitates a reversal of the communal erosion and diffusion invited by many of the major technologies of the last century. The mobile phone disrupts the centrifugal process of communal decay and offers a counter-tendency, a centripetal movement toward close interdependence. I characterized the new forms of interdependence in terms of floating worlds, resonating with the floating worlds in earlier Japanese times. While similar to the earlier floating worlds in their mobility, their uncontrollability, and their emphasis on social pleasures, they differ in terms of the tight bonds of interdependence facilitated by the mobile phone. As I proposed, these new floating worlds are important politically, inasmuch as they move the center of concern from societal politics to petty bourgeois tensions. At the same time, when political concerns are highly salient, cell phone technology invites the solidification of opinion and the closure of dialogue.

To be sure, these views must be understood as contributions to a conversation as opposed to conclusive observations. Interpretations of cultural life are limited in many ways, not the least of which owing to historical location. This limitation is particularly important in the case of technology, as new technologies are continuously being fed into the matrix of cultural life, and are appropriated in many different ways by different sub-cultures (e.g. Katz, 1999). In the case of the mobile phone, the problem is acute. Because of the vast popularity of the mobile phone, there is enormous corporate competition for market share. To exceed in this competition, there is a continuous press toward innovation. Thus, the half-life of any particular version of the mobile phone may be brief. New developments are everywhere apparent.

It is also clear that as new generations of the mobile phone emerge, they can significantly alter the picture painted within the present paper. For example, as the industry continues to add such capacities as music channels, e-mail, internet facilities, and mobile games, the cell phone will lose much of its ability to empower close-knit relationships. In

effect, it will join the ranks of technologies of fragmentation and diffusion. On the other hand, the addition of text messaging, speaker visualization and phone tracking devices may function centripetally to strengthen in-group ties.

In terms of cultural and political futures, the present analysis invites attention to the implications of micro-social fragmentation. I don't wish to argue that the mobile phone will subvert the major conflicts derived from broad differences in class, race, religion and ethnicity and the like. For example, Paragas (2003) has documented the use of text messages for purposes of mutually affirming political commitment, and coordinating political protest. The mobile phone has also been used as an organizing device by right wing and Muslim terrorists in the United States. As Rheingold (2002) advances, it has also been an invaluable asset in organizing street demonstrations, and the emergence of what he calls "smart mobs". In terms of lethal conflict, however, we might welcome the effects of mobile communication in moving the site of conflict from the macro to the micro-level.

The challenge for the future, however, is that of "edgework". How can we soften the boundaries of otherwise competing and conflicting groups within and across societies? There is reason to hope that the technologies responsible for the disruption of local communities may ultimately generate webs of interdependence that will reduce deep loyalties to the micro level group. Mobile phone technology may be advanced in a way that a single phone will embody the potential of multiple cell-phones. That is, they will enable the user to sustain multiple group relations with greater ease.

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