21A.850J / STS.484J The Anthropology of Cybercultures
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Student A

Nicola Green and the detrimental impact of 'always on' connectivity on the quality of contemporary urban life

Summary

In her article, 'On the Move: Technology, Mobility, and the Mediation of Social Time and Space' Nicola Green explores the impact of mobile communication technologies on our conceptions of space-time relations in contemporary urban space. The article highlights a general trend from 'durable co-present' to 'fragmented and disconnected spatial and temporal connections' following a review of conceptual tools (i.e. presence availability, speed space, timeless time) in the literature. She fully acknowledges that the work of Williams, McLuhan, Virilio, Giddens and Harvey among others suggests ways for understanding time-space relations in contemporary urban spaces. However, building on an argument put forward by Dorren Massey, Green stresses the need for empirical work that explores how mobile communication technologies are experienced in everyday life. Such research, she argues, might yield insights that work as a corrective to some of the more abstract theoretical treatments.

Three 'interconnected domains' of 'mobile time' are offered that might help: rhythms of mobile use, rhythms of mobile use in everyday life, rhythms of mobility and institutional change. These categories are abstracted from a three year ethnographic study *The Social Technical Shaping of Mobile Multimedia Personal Communications* that investigated a variety of groups and locales using interviews and observations of public spaces such as trains, train stations, main streets, and malls.

The idea that mobile computing and telecommunications technologies are transforming our everyday experience of time and space is generally supported. However, Green stresses the need for 'analytical sensitivity' to both 'geographical space' and 'social and cultural locality' when considering the relations of space-time relations mediated by mobile technologies. In short, she argues that the impact of space-time relations mediated by mobile technologies impacts upon different groups in a subtle and differential ways. Moreover, the ethnographic approach reveals the degree to which the practical constructions of mobile time in everyday life remain firmly connected to well-established time-based practices. This leads Green to highlight a variety of contradictions in the existing discourse. For example, she argues:

'The device and its functionalities can stand in for, but can also create, community or network. On the one hand, social space time are "extended," and on the other, they remain locally continuous ... communities are being formed in highly contradictory ways, which reflect new disjunctures, as well as new continuities, in the relationship between space, time and location'.

Indeed, Green concludes by arguing:

'What seems at issue is not only the fact or extent of temporal change in the face of mobile technologies, but also the situated, differential effects of those changes for different individuals and social groups. These are not only descriptive questions (what has changed and how?) but also quantitative questions (with what consequences, for whom)' (p.291).

Critique

The logic of the argument for more empirically formed research is forceful and the examples and categories offered certainly succeed in sensitising the reader to some of the ways mobile communications technologies are appropriated by and impact upon the everyday lives of different groups. Nevertheless, I don't find the three categories offered as the fruits of this rigorous and corrective research agenda particularly useful. Indeed, I find myself asking what to we gain by considering the idea that there are three different 'rhythms' of mobile temporarily? For example, in the section, *Rhythms of Mobile usage*, the data draws our attention to the ways mobile phones encourage 'short conversations' and introduce new conversational opportunities than before'. Does this really lead to a sense of 'temporal fragmentation?' Little consideration is given to the possibility that people may be trying to save money or becoming increasingly frustrated by the ways mobile companies are inventing new ways to encourage people to engage in frivolous and inefficient modes of communication (i.e. like text messaging) in an attempt to bolster profits. The data tells a story that is not always developed in the interpretation. For example, Green describes how teens waste their time playing 'who's got whose number' games and counting the number of text messages they have received to bolster their dwindling self-esteem. Do these practices really 'symbolically cement' the durability of social relationships in local communities as the author suggests? This seems like a rather creative interpretation that reads the data presented against the grain. Indeed, at times, it appears that the author attempts to accord more significance to a disparate array of observational findings than is really justified by the data.

Nevertheless, in the section on Rhythms of Everyday life the author adopts a refreshingly cynical stance. Catherine, a sales representative, confesses 'my mobile is my life' and Green proceeds to highlight the various ways the 'always on' telepresence bought about by mobile communications have empowered employers to invade, encroach upon and monopolise the leisure and family time of their employees. As one women quoted in a confirmatory study by Ullman puts it: 'my work hours have leaked into all parts of the day and week'. As a result, Green argues that 'the advantages of mobility and 'telepresence' were, for those surveyed, sometimes offset by the drawbacks of permanent availability for work. This seems like a modest interpretation given the data presented. Indeed, the plight of the student on the train who turns her mobile off to evade the surveillance strategies of an over-protective mother, suggests that mobile devices are now being used as tools for exploitation, surveillance and control that leaves many teens 'fraught with anxiety'. Nevertheless, to be fair, Green's interpretation of the data does provide a valuable corrective to the more celebratory 'always on' uncritical utopianism foisted upon us by mobile marketing campaigns and Perry et al's construction of mobile

technologies as Lazarus devices that 'resurrect' mobile time that would have previously been considered dead, unproductive time.

In short, I find the three 'rhythm' abstractions offered as a conceptual tools rather vague and the concluding statements far less interesting or useful than an argument that remains implicit in the data and that could have been used to build a more forceful critique of the various ways the mobile industry has duped us into misrecognising various ways 'always on' connectivity is eroding the quality of everyday life.

For a good example of some of the sophisticated strategies now employed by Mobile phone companies see: T-Mobile Ad

Student B

The following link is more related to our discussion on bioinformatics and the cyborg than this week's discussion but I couldn't resist sharing it: Hazel Sive Science Minute Professor Sive who put this short film together is a professor of biology at MIT. She uses many types of short films to illustrate her biology teachings.

Regarding this week's readings, I found Ito, Okabe and Anderson's approach of how portable devices mediate relationships to spaces and infrastructure interesting. This led me to think about how such devices also mediate who gets access to what spaces. For instance, who gets to "camp" in cafes and Starbucks? Who is more a target of a "depersonalizing" versus "personalizing" marketing and customer approach? I am thinking also of virtual spaces such as networking forums, blogs, semi-private distribution lists: how is access mediated to these spaces in such a way that it might be differentiated for people? What does it take to be an active, "present" person in these spaces? To me it seems to take at least time, social networks, ability for good written communication and efficient (new, powerful) mobile devices. I find these questions all the more interesting as there is much discussion about how information technologies make communication and information so cheap as to provide access for everyone. In many ways it would seem interesting to also look at these urban and virtual spaces as being "privatized" (in the sense of non public) rather than personalized through the use of portable devices.

Student C

Both reading are well correlated in a way they illustrate the different modes of how people occupying themselves in the public space and on the other side, synchronize the rhythm of their social life within this culture of mobility.

Ito, Okabe and Anderson present an interesting classification. Yet, having borrowed the term from nature (cocooning) and traveling (camping/footprinting), they can actually expand their use of analogies to assess other possibility of how people behave in social space such as Netting, Hunting, Tracking, Den, Cell, Hive, Nomadic etc.

One little thing that bother me is that they use too much case on reward card / discount card for footprinting section and don't cover other possible footprinting milieu such as membership on the airplane, hotel, hospital, in which they don't just give you some financial rewards, but also create a personalization ambiance so that you feel like finding your pseudo-territoriality in demand.

I agree with Green's argument that although social time and space are extended or pressurized as the result of adopting the rhythm of mobile use in our life style and working style, the structure of our social time activity remains continuous instead of disconnected by this mobile technology.

Personally, I don't think that increasing individualistic behavior in the modern city had mostly affected by those portable objects so that people can cocooning ourselves. 'Cause we can simply 'cocooning' ourselves anywhere, anytime by shifting our focus from the surrounding environment to our own thought without that devices. Instead, this individualism might be affected mostly by the gap between our socializing capacity and the demand of the city culture and infrastructure.

Nevertheless, these two insight observation present a very valuable fact that within this freedom of personalizing ourselves using these mobile devices, we are getting more and more selective in engaging with our environment. So, the next issue for us, who deal with place-making, is how to deal with that freedom.

[First], we can compete with those devices by enhancing our physical environment and provide something that irresistible, something that visually and/or audibly so amazing, so the only way to experience it is by unplugging / off lining ourselves from our portable devices.

[Second], we can just deny those inconvenient physical realities and enhance our portable devices technology to become more pervasive and surreal. For instance, you can install some tiny projector on your sunglasses to perform a kind of VR, overlay our sight transparently with something that is more interesting. If you don't like that Gehry building, this VR can just replace it with a sky background as if it never there.

[Lastly], we may integrate the physical environment with our portable devices, so that it can magnify the sense of the local place. For example: your multimedia mobile phone can detect your position, your surrounding environment and automatically play a song that relevant to it. Or you can listen to specific information related to a specific spot that you're looking at. Like an audio guided tour while you are at some historical place. Our devices can become our 'personal adaptive soundtrack'

Student D

First off – I'm really sad that I'm going to miss today's discussion because this topic is particularly relevant to my research interests! Here are a few thoughts on the readings and postings (sorry to be brief, but it's sponsors' week at the lab and things are a bit hectic):

(1) I agree about the lack of breadth in the descriptions of how mobile devices are used in different local settings. The work of Jan Chipchase provides some richness to this conversation. He focuses on the specific local practices that have arisen around the use of mobile technologies in a non-Western setting: Shared Phone Use

(2) What I like about the Ito et al. paper is the focus on spatial ramifications in the immediate surroundings of a person through the use of their mobile devices. I really appreciate their categories because they demonstrate how non-deterministic the use of mobile technologies in public spaces really is.

To this point, Wanda pointed out an interesting snippet about mobile phone use in China. Though this article also highlights the communication-use of the mobile devices there are specific ramifications for the social setting and the relationship to the physical location of the people as they pick up their calls in the middle of a public talk or meeting.

Student E

I thought the readings were quite interesting this week -- I was particularly interested in Green's use of Doren Massey's use of "power-geometries" that are revealed by questions about who moves and who doesn't as we consider mobility. I found myself considering the (somewhat) parallel tensions implicit between individualized and customized technologies and infrastructures – I have just started reading some of Nicholas Rose's work on the relationship between economic life and individuals, and how the drive toward self-regulation has freed the state to do less of the day-to-day governing and more of the "steering." We are pushed to become mobile as much as mobility is something we seek out ---

Finally, I found Ito et al's hybrid methodology of ethnographic work combined with self-reflexive diary-keeping fascinating because it results in results that offered traditional qualitative insights but also explicitly relied upon the subjects themselves to engage in the process of producing research on their own practices. Given Student B's sense that these outcomes were pretty self-evident, I wonder whether in fact the researchers should have pushed the subjects to have more rigorously engaged in self-reflexive practices (which the final interview and diary review presumably were intended to do). Anthropologist Geraldine Bloustein, who used amateur video-making to study identity experimentation in public and private among adolescent girls, also explored collaborative data collection. I would like to see a study that focused more explicitly on this question rather than a comparative analysis that I sensed collapsed some important nuances in the interest of fitting practices into labels like "cocooning" and "camping". That said, I still found this article provocative.