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Exploring the implications for social identity of the new sociology of the mobile phone.

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Abstract

'... the cellular telephone, merely the first wave of an imminent invasion of portable digital communications tools to come, will undoubtedly lead to fundamental transformations in individuals' perceptions of self and the world, and consequently the way they collectively construct that world.' (Townsend, 2000)

Traditionally an individual's social identity has been interlinked with their location within physical space. The revolution in mobile communication has partially replaced the old location-based paradigm with the new social network-based paradigm. This paper explores the impact of this new paradigm and its introduction of a 'second space' in which individuals are placed while they are engaged with their mobile phones on the creation and presentation of social identity. The stresses that are placed upon the individual and those around them resulting from the incongruity of the two spaces are discussed.

Social Identity

Much of the research and thinking regarding the development of the self has been based on James' (1890) distinction between the private self (the "I") and the public self (the "me"). The "I" represents the part of the self that is more like a subject or agent, acting upon the world; whereas the "me" is the part that is more like an object that may be reflected upon by oneself and others (Gilbert et al 1998). The image of the public self, or the social identity, is the representation of themselves that individuals present to the outside world. It is also used by surrounding people to develop their general idea or concept of that individual. This development of general ideas or concepts of other people

(often known as categorisation or stereotyping) is a necessary process which, it has been suggested, takes place to allow for more efficient processing of information about people so that more attention can be directed to other, goal-oriented tasks (Macrae, Milne et al. 1993). Tajfel and Turner (1979) suggested that the basic human need for a positive self-image necessitated the categorisation of people into 'ingroup' and 'outgroup'. They explained that individuals will join particular groups (which become their 'ingroup') and will tend to see their group as preferable to any outside group (the 'outgroup'). People will use the projected public image or social identity of another individual to group them accordingly and the result of this grouping will dictate the person's future behaviour towards the other individual.

Although people will tend to have a single general idea or concept of another individual, from the perspective of the individual there is no limit to the number of social identities that may be associated with them. James's (1892) made the following rather bold statement: '*A man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him and carry an image of him in their mind*' (p.179) (which he later altered to 'there are as many social selves as *groups* of individuals who know him'). [It is important to note that this 'multiplicity of self' is merely a metaphor as social identity is about an individual's attributes i.e. the unity of the 'actual self' is not questioned.]

Social Identities Across Time

An individual's set of social identities tend to be presented within the framework of roles that are played e.g. mother, manager, friend, artist. The segmentation of roles along the time axis have traditionally been linear and unitary. Within each time segment, usually attached to a particular location, a single role was played and displayed. A change in role would often be associated with a change of location. This, however, is being challenged by mobile communication.

The Old, Location-Based Paradigm

Before the introduction of the mobile phone, the use of time was defined by location of an individual (Geser 2003, Fortunati 2002). The regulation of communication between an individual and their social network and the sequence of roles played by an individual was originally governed by physical disconnection. Fortunati (2002) holds that these times of physical disconnection, 'these moments of pause, which were very precious, structured the network of relations inside a rhythm of presence / absence' (p.518). For instance, before the mobile phone, while shopping with her children at the weekends, a mother would mostly receive communications from her children i.e. those with whom she is co-located – she would therefore be totally and continuously identified with the role of mother for the duration of the weekend; similarly, while in the office during the week, she would tend to be totally and continuously identified with the role of manager as the communications she would most received would, again, be from her co-located colleagues. Although these examples are somewhat simplified, they are intended to demonstrate that generally the individual would tend to remain identified with a single role until the next role takes over, for instance when a manager arrives home and takes on the role of mother. This would mean that in public spaces a single identity would

generally be projected: the manager remains a manager while she travels between her office and a meeting; the football fan remains a football fan while he travels home from a match. These roles would generally be presented without interruption and this would be how their fellow travellers saw and categorised them.

In each instant and from within in each role, the presentation of the self could be deliberately chosen and manipulated. The 'project of the self' (Giddens 1991; Cohen and Wakeford 2003) could be carried out and developed. The individual had relative control over their 'projects of self' or their presentations of self to the world because of the necessary relationship between communication and location; communication and roles played were dictated by the individual's location in physical space.

The New, Social Network-Based Paradigm

With the introduction and use of mobile phones, to a certain extent, communication has been abstracted from the constraints of physical space – people can be reached anytime, anyplace. Along with this, the use of time has also, to a certain extent, been abstracted from location; for instance, people can now use the time sitting on a train to organise their meetings for the following day.

'The mapping between activities and places will dissolve, and everyplace will be for everything all the time.' (Agre 2001)

'In a very general way, cell phones introduce an element of entropy into all locational social orders, because they permeate them with communicative relationships which transcend system boundaries in highly heterogeneous and unpredictable ways.' (Geser 2003 section 7.1).

The result of this is that the layout, along the time axis, of activities and the roles with which they are associated, has become overlapping and unpredictable – simultaneity has replaced linearity. Boundaries between roles have become much more fluid.

The Nature of this New Space

With the introduction of mobile communication, social systems have become less location-based and more people-based. People can stay in touch on the move, maintaining a 'nomadic intimacy' (Fortunati 2002). The social world has become a system of networked communities which are held together not by place, but by 'symbolic processes' such as trust building (Nyiri 2003). Communication and boundaries have become much more fluid. The result of this is that while people are physically in one place playing one role, they can be forced into another role, in the same physical space, by a mobile call from someone from another context. Meyrowitz (1985) suggests that this presents a violation of the boundaries of place (physical space) and that this changes the social significance of where we are.

'The old schedule of minutes, hours, days, and weeks becomes shattered into a constant stream of negotiations, reconfigurations, and rescheduling. One can be

interrupted or interrupt friends and colleagues at any time. Individuals live in this phonespace and they can never let it go because it is their primary link to the temporally, spatially fragmented network of friends and colleagues they have constructed for themselves. (Townsend 2000)

Palen et al (2001) maintain that 'when mobile users are on the phone, they are simultaneously in two spaces: the space they physically occupy, and the virtual space of the conversation (the conversational space)'. They also state that 'when a call comes in (or perhaps more pretentiously, when a call is placed out), the user decides, consciously or otherwise, what face takes precedence: that face that is consonant with one's physical environment, or that of the conversational space?' (ibid). The space that takes precedence is often referred to as the 'frontstage' (Goffman 1971) while the secondary space is referred to as the 'backstage' (ibid.). If the physical space becomes a backstage activity while a mobile conversation takes frontstage, the individual is said to have an 'absent presence' i.e. they are physically present but 'absorbed by a technologically mediated world of elsewhere' (Gergen 2002).

So, individuals now have the added complexity of having to operate in two distinct spaces: the locational space where they physically reside, and 'phonespace' (Townsend 2000) where mobile communication takes place.

Whence Social Identity?

The uncertainty regarding the abstraction of roles from location can cause tremendous stress for the individual – with mobile communication available continuously, it is impossible to predict when each role a person has is going to be called upon. They have to remain prepared for all roles at all times. This is clearly demonstrated by the incongruity of body language as discussed by Plant (2001):

'There can be something comical about the mobile user attempting the difficult task of managing a call whose purpose and emotional registers are at odds with those around them: the conversation with a lover on a train, or with an irate boss in a bar. Certain conversations can induce emotional and bodily responses which may be quite incompatible with their perceptions of their physical location. Their participants often look as though they don't quite know what to do with themselves, how to reconfigure the tones of voice and postures which would normally accompany such conversations.' (p.50)

This incongruity of behaviour can also cause stress for those around the individual. Those others may have to alter their idea of the individual's identity when they view behaviour that seems incongruous with the social identity they have previously associated with them. Also they will tend to feel that one or other identity was 'false'; as Palen et al (2001) suggest, the mere fact of showing different faces to the present and to the absent interaction partners 'brings to the fore that faces are publicly assumed, which then gives rise to the feeling that the new face and perhaps even the old face are false'. This could explain some of the irritation or discomfort people experience when they observe other individuals on mobiles in public. The discomfort occurs because it challenges the generally held view of individuals as unitary and as having a consistent identity.

Multiple identities seen in one individual does not mean that any are 'false'. The number of identities projected can be explained by a number of theories on the nature of identity: two such theories being identity as contingency and identity as roles. Identity as contingency is presented by Levinson (1997) when she writes 'thinking about identities as contingent is one way to turn the conversation about identity from an attempt to determine or discover once and for all what each of us is to a discussion of the multiple and often conflicting ways in which we are constituted as social subjects and positioned in relation to each other, to social institutions, and social structures'. Although individuals have to come to terms with their own array of social identities, highlighted by the pervasiveness of the mobile phone, and find a way to manage them, others around those individuals also have to come to terms with the fact that this individual that they knew as "x" also has an identity as "y" and as "z", etc.

From the viewpoint of the second theory, observing 'the simultaneous, visible acting out of different roles makes it easier to recognise that individuals actually play roles (instead of just displaying their personality). Consequently, bystanders will be more prone to attribute individual behaviour to varying social roles, while the attribution to stable personality traits becomes more difficult because such attributions have to be consistent with all the divergent forms of behaviour observed' (Geser 2003 section 5.2).

The boundaries around each 'identity' have become increasingly fluid; it is also the task of the individual to regain a control of those boundaries or develop a way of managing them in order to reduce the stress on themselves and those around them. An instance of this is people making their own person space in the public arena: 'it was observed ... that many people sitting down in public spaces – at café tables, for example, or on park benches – tend to draw their bodies up, taking their feet off the ground, or otherwise create a feeling of safety and withdrawal. Alternatively, the body may be turned away from the world, perhaps towards a corner, or a wall, or even – as observed on several occasions in Hong Kong, an unused telephone kiosk – as though to protect the conversation' (Plant 2000, p.52). Conscious call-filtering, an action commonly practiced, can also aid avoidance of role confusion.

From the point of view of the mobile interlocutor, it can be helpful to know the location of the individual in order to understand which role they are likely to be embodying in their current physical space: hence the commonly-asked question "where are you?". This question is partly seen as a conversation starter and way of creating a common base from which people can build the conversation or relationship: 'all human communication is to some extent founded on a common basis of understanding between the participants; a commonness stemming from mutual consensus about values and goals, or from the simple fact that they are embedded in a common environmental setting' (Geser 2003 section 4.5). But it could also be to ascertain which role the other is *physically* associated with and therefore determine how to engage with them or how to interpret what they are saying given their context e.g. calling someone at work is likely to find them in the company of their colleagues and /or manager.

Could this be partly what makes virtual world so appealing? People can only portray a single identity at a time in virtual worlds because of the single channel of 'communication' (which in physical places would also include visual cues); individuals are able to experiment with their identities without danger of interruption by another of their 'identities' i.e. a mobile phone ringing next to a web surfer cannot be heard by fellow surfers. This used to be the way the physical world worked because of the relative predictability of the surrounding environment but this has been fundamentally interrupted by the appearance of the mobile phone.

Conclusion

Two fundamental assumptions have been overturned with the introduction of mobile communication:

- 1) while moving, communicative potentials are minimised or even totally suspended;
- 2) as a result of bodily movement, spatial distances are created which are incompatible with the maintenance of communicative relations.
(Geser 2003 section 1)

Communication is now increasingly abstracted from the physical location of two individuals. This has resulted in individuals being increasingly engaged in the 'phonespace' and therefore having to manage simultaneous existence and self-presentation in two spaces. This can cause stress for both the individual and for those around them. Social identities clash when two or more roles have to be played out in a single physical space. This reduction in boundaries between roles is a phenomenon which individuals will have to find strategies to manage. Equally they will have to learn to accept the multiple aspects of identity which those around them maintain.

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