



Mobile Communities and the 'Generation that Beeps and Hums'

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ABSTRACT

A number of recent studies have shown that Australian youth, like their European counterparts, are utilising mobile phones – alone or in combination with the Internet – to develop and maintain new mobile youth communities. This can be seen not only as a lifestyle adaptation of information and communication technologies (ICTs) but also in response to the feelings of insecurity and lack of identity brought about by the erosion of traditional 'places' – the home, family and community – an erosion which is occurring partly as a result of unprecedented rapid technological development.

INTRODUCTION

"Community" is nowadays another name for paradise lost – but one to which we dearly hope to return ... (Zygmunt Bauman).

The erosion of traditional forms and places of family and community that we are now witnessing began with the Industrial Revolution that was accompanied by the phenomenon of 'mobile privatisation'¹. This erosion has escalated as a result of a complex symbiosis of societal change and rapid developments in information and communication technologies (ICTs). As Meyrowitz observes, it is as a result of ICTs that our world has become 'for the first time in modern history ... relatively placeless'².

The development of an industrial economy uprooted the population, forged a division between work and home and isolated community members from each other in privatised forms of living. In enabling communication with geographically dispersed family members, the telephone, radio and newspaper helped to maintain extended families and communities that were no longer tied directly to place. More recently, the television and computer have contributed to the dissolution of boundaries between work/home; public/private. ICTs have altered the significance of place, time and space. 'Wherever one is now – at home, at work, or in a car – one may be in touch and tuned-in'³.

THE IMPACT OF ICTS ON HOME AND COMMUNITY

'Home' and 'community' are entities that are universally both imagined and desired. They share similar qualities although one is located in the private, the other in the public realm. 'Home': that 'firm position which we know, to which we are accustomed, where we feel safe, and where our emotional relationships are at their most intense'⁴, is also associated with the maintenance of a society's moral values. To be 'homeless' is to be seen to be without morality⁵.

Largely as a result of ICTs, the family home is no longer a distinct, bounded space, nor are the roles of its members as readily identified. Before ICTs, most social information systems were defined by physical places such as the home and the factory. Movement from one place to another across space took time and involved a change in social situation. Doorways acted as markers of roles and status or 'place', as they have the ability to admit or exclude, to limit or allow perception and interaction. In their ability to permeate walls and travel great distances

in an instant, ICTs 'destroy the specialness of space and time' and bypass 'the social rite of "passage"'. They also destroy the specialness of place – a uniqueness attributed by the activities associated with it – by turning public spaces into private ones and private spaces into public ones. 'Through such media, what is happening almost anywhere can be happening wherever we are. Yet when we are everywhere, we are also no place in particular'⁶.

Our need to belong to a secure, familiar place within which we know our social 'place', extends beyond the home to the outside community. However, the traditional community has also undergone significant change as a result of ICTs.

'... it is difficult to think of community without location, without a sense of the continuities of social life which are grounded, literally, in place. Community, then, is a version of home. But it is public not private. It is to be sought and sometimes found in the space between the household and the family and the wider society'⁷.

We all want to belong to a community but as a result of fragmenting culture, fractured experience and social and geographical mobility, we lack certainty as to what it is. Young people today are growing up within homes of mixed or single parent families; within communities that lack a shared value system such as that previously offered by religious belief; and in an era in which so-called 'multiculturalism' and 'globalisation' compete with localism/regionalism. Bauman notes the demise of the "epistemological foundation" of the experience of *community*: of 'the steady and solidly dug-in orientation points' – such as the 'friendly' bank and corner store – 'which suggested a social setting that was more durable, more secure and more reliable than the timespan of an individual life'⁸.

Furthermore, where once so-called 'mass communication' purportedly held a 'passive' audience together in the home/community, the proliferation and increased individualisation of ICTs have fragmented the now more obviously 'interactive' audiences. The availability of ICTs also means that it is now virtually impossible to shield the young from graphic depictions of global terrorism such as the events of September 11: events that subverted notions of durability and security on a grand scale and that have most likely heightened the need for Bauman's 'steady and solidly dug-in orientation points'.

For parents and governmental regulators, ICTs are often perceived to pose a threat to national/local cultures as well as to the 'sanctity' of home and its – and by extension, the community's – moral fabric. In such a view, the young are seen as the victims of the tyranny of technology. These moral panics are related to boundary fears (parent/child; private/public) and in particular, parental fears associated with lack of control⁹. The variety, proliferation and mobility of electronic media devices together with the greater competence of the young in their usage, render parental attempts at their regulation useless. Mobile technological devices allow teenagers a separate (mediated) existence all day long, away from the communal family areas within the home – and outside it.

NEW MOBILE YOUTH COMMUNITIES

Technology, however, is shaped as well as a shaping phenomenon. A number of researchers have found that ICTs are used in ways that reinforce existing social relationships at the same time as they appear to be transforming our lives. Adolescents' use of mobile phones for text messaging is one example of how people turn devices to their own creative uses¹⁰ and it seems that adolescents are creating new 'mobile communities'. Rheingold's study¹¹ reveals that it is 12-25 year olds who are leading this social revolution. He cites two Swedish examples: 'Lunarstorm' and 'Mgage'¹². Often incorporating a merger of SMS text messaging and online chat, these platforms are utilised for both social and political ends – to swarm in malls or mobilize on the streets. Lunarstorm attained over one million members (mostly high school students) in less than a year. Mobile services have been enhanced so that anything the user can do on its website can be done from his/her mobile phone using standard SMS messages. Mgage's system 'makes it possible for teenagers to maintain continuous presence in their virtual worlds, moving to SMS from online chat, and back'¹³.

AUSTRALIA

A similar phenomenon is occurring in Australia. The need to form new mobile communities seems to be a response to an era of change accompanied by youth pessimism and a lack of security. A 1996 study of 15-24 year olds undertaken by the Australian Science, Technology and Engineering Council found that young people were more inclined to believe that new technologies would be used to 'entrench and concentrate wealth and power' rather than to 'empower people and strengthen democracy'. The respondents wished for Australian society to place more emphasis on 'community and family, the environment and cooperation' rather than 'individual, material wealth and competition'¹⁴.

Mobile phones are a tool of empowerment and socialisation for young people. A national report commissioned by the Australian Commonwealth Consumer Affairs Advisory Council (2002), found that mobile phones are probably the most important product for young people. 'Respondents said mobile phones symbolised freedom, growing up, excitement and having fun and were "must haves" for teenagers wanting to keep up and achieve social acceptance'¹⁵.

A South Australian poll (2002) found that almost 70% of youths send more text messages than mobile phone calls. SMS was regarded as a useful, cheaper and more discreet tool for approaching members of the opposite sex¹⁶. A Melbourne University study found that young people used mobile phones at home, at school and university to maintain existing friendship groups; to establish and reinforce individual and group identity; to exercise power and to 'achieve a sense of cohesion by dealing with the fragmentation of their lives ... ICTs such as email, mobile phones and chat help young people to develop and maintain virtual communities of family, friends and other young people with similar interests'¹⁷. The sense of belonging to a group was reinforced as a result of frequent calls between current and former friends. The researchers conclude that ICTs have 'shaped the young peoples' lives and facilitated new ways of interacting' whilst themselves being adapted to the users' needs¹⁸.

Like Rheingold, Australian social researcher Hugh Mackay has also observed new youth communities. After spending the day together at school, students communicate via mobile phone on their way home, and then use their home computer to email or chat. Mackay asserts that

this – the 'generation that beeps and hums', having grown up in an age of rapid change, rely on one another in order to cope with life's uncertainty and that in doing so, they are reforming our society. 'Their desire to connect, and to stay connected, will reshape this society. They are the harbingers of a new sense of community, a new tribalism, that will challenge every thing from our old-fashioned respect for privacy to the way we conduct our relationships and the way we build our houses'¹⁹.

CONCLUSION

Young people in developed countries are reclaiming the 'lost paradise' of community in the twenty-first century by means of their creative adaptation of new information and communication technologies. They utilise these technologies to form and to maintain communal meeting places that are both virtual and face-to-face. In doing so, they simultaneously maintain a sense of self-identity and 'place', freedom and belonging, thereby offering our societies new possibilities for community formation and renewal.

ENDNOTES

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- ¹⁰ Strathern in Silverstone and Hirsch, 1992, x.
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- ¹² www.lunarstorm.se; mgage.com.
- ¹³ Rheingold, www.thefeature.com.
- ¹⁴ Mackay, Hugh (1997) *Generations: Baby Boomers, their parents & their children*, Macmillan, Sydney, 172-173.
- ¹⁵ <http://parlsec.treasurer.gov.au/parlsec/content/pressreleases/2002/033.asp?pf+1>.
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