

MOBILITY AND CONNECTIONS

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The Context of Mobility

The last year or two has seen an astonishing focusing of attention upon issues of mobility. In UK there were widespread protests against petrol tax increases involving slow-moving convoys, the blocking of supplies and the use of mobiles to coordinate the mobile protest. Mobile campaigns took place in many places against 'global capitalism', with marches, sit-ins and occupations of actual and virtual sites (WTO). There was an outcry against illegal asylum-seeking and the 'smuggling' of human beings involving far-flung networks. Foot-and-mouth disease in the UK was brought about the mobility of a virus caused by unregulated sheep mobility, one response being to 'close' the countryside. September 11th showed how 'terrorists' could move through different countries transmutating from student to tourist to terrorist and back again. One outcome was a flight from mobility especially by Americans for whom mobility had become a way of life. And trains entering the Channel Tunnel had to be stopped for a period because of the efforts by asylum seekers to board them as they entered the UK..

In each case attempts were made to channel, to regulate, to enhance or to cease some mobilities as opposed to others. Politics, social life and increasingly social theory have become a matter of 'contested mobilities' and contested metaphors of the 'mobile life'. And mobility it seems is central to the way in which people live in an increasingly 'networked society' (Castells 1996; see Axhausen 2002, on its implications for travel).

There are five highly interdependent 'mobilities' that form and re-form diverse networks:

- * corporeal travel of people for work, leisure, family life, pleasure, migration and escape
- * physical movement of objects delivered to producers, consumers and retailers
- * imaginative travel elsewhere through images of places and peoples upon TV (1 billion worldwide)
- * virtual travel often in real time on the internet so transcending geographical and social distance; as Microsoft asks: 'where do you want to go today?'
- * communicative travel through person-to-person messages via letters, telephone, fax and mobile

Most social research focuses upon one or other of these separate mobilities, such as passenger transport or goods transport or the internet. The ambition of *Sociology Beyond Societies* and some of my later work is to examine the profoundly important interconnections between these mobilities that are central to making and maintaining complex connections in a 'networked society'.

There are some immense movements involved here (see Urry 2000). People in Britain are now physically travelling five times further than in the 1950s. There are 700m international journeys every year, a figure soon to pass 1 billion. There are 4 million air passengers each day. 'Travel and tourism' is the largest industry accounting for 11.7% of world GDP, 8% of world exports and 8% of employment. Tens of millions of refugees and asylum seekers roam the globe, with 3 billion people receiving the same income as the richest, mobile 300. Physical mobilities are environmentally costly, with transport accounting for one-third of CO2 emissions. World car travel is predicted to triple between 1990-2050, there are over half-a-billion cars roaming the globe, and many new countries, such as China, are developing an 'automobile culture'. By 2030 there may be 1 billion cars worldwide (Motavalli 2000: 20-1).

Simultaneously there is mobility along the internet: it is only a decade old, it has a faster take-up than any previous technology and 1 billion users are expected by 2005 (see Castells 2001). The flows of foreign exchange each day are worth \$1.4 trillion, sixty times greater than the flows of world trade of goods and services.

And communications 'on the move' are being transformed with new mobile phones more common than land-line phones.

Mobile spaces and their other

In analysing the effects of these technologies there is rather little examination of the 'other' to them. And yet it is these others that are seen as potentially transformed by the growth of these various technologies. Whether these technologies are viewed as utopic or a dystopic, the pre-virtual is presumed to be a knowable and rather taken-for-granted other that is being transformed by new forms of a mobile existence. There have been various attempts to formulate such transformations in the nature of connections 'at-a-distance'. Thus there is a 'death of distance' (Cairncross 1997), a speeded-up 'liquid modernity' (Bauman 2000), the development of an 'internet galaxy' (Castells 2001), as well as the 'globalisation' of economic, social and political life (Held et al 1999). All though presuppose something knowable about life before what we might term the electronic and mobile 'big bang'.

Normally this knowable other is characterised as 'real', as opposed to the airy, fragile, and virtual relationships of the mobile networks. And the real is normally taken to involve the concept of 'community'. Real life is seen to comprise enduring, face-to-face, communitarian connections, while the mobile world is made up of fragile, mobile, airy and inchoate connections. Examining the consequences of the various new technologies rests upon a series of what are seen as overlapping and reinforcing dichotomies: real/ unreal, face-to-face/ life on the screen, immobile/ mobile, community/ virtual and presence/ absence.

I argue against such dichotomies, in part because all relationships in all societies have always involved diverse 'connections'. Such connections are more or less 'at a distance', more or less intense, more or less mobile, and more or less machinic. Social relations are not fixed or located in place but are constituted through various 'circulating entities' (Latour 1999: 17). There are many circulating entities that bring about relationality at multiple and varied distances. Circulating entities result in multiple 'connections' that cannot be conceptualised in terms of the dichotomies above. All social relationships involve complex patterns of immediate presence and intermittent absence at-a-distance.

However, sociology, like other social sciences, has overly focused upon ongoing, more or less face-to-face social interactions between peoples and within social groups. Sociology has taken connections to be most importantly face-to-face, characterised by social interactions with those who are immediately present. However, this is problematic since there are many connections with peoples and social groupings that are not based upon regular face-to-face interactions. There are multiple forms of 'imagined presence' through diverse objects and images that carry connections across, and into, multiple kinds of social space.

But of course of specific occasions and for particular periods, face-to-face connections are made, resulting from extensive corporeal movement. People travel on occasions to connect, but how and why some travel takes place for some connections has not been much examined within the social sciences. What thus is missing in discussions of the mobile and especially the virtual is the nature of connections, especially how these are formed and reformed through various kinds of 'circulating entities', including patterns of travel. In order to analyse these connections I turn to some notions of 'community'. I then consider some significant ways in which connections are significantly remaking the notions of presence and absence. There is no simple replacement of the continuously present by the mobile absent.

Communities

It is useful to distinguish between three different senses of 'community' (Bell and Newby 1976). First, there is community in a topographical sense. This refers to settlement based upon close geographical propinquity, but where there is no implication of the quality of the social relationships found in such

settlements of intense co-presence. Second, there is the sense of community as the local social system in which there a localised, relatively bounded set of systemic interrelationships of social groups and local institutions. Third, there is communion, a human association that is characterised by close personal ties, belongingness and warmth between its members. The last of these is what is conventionally meant by the idea of 'community' relationships (and see Putnam 2000).

Bell and Newby show that communion is not necessarily produced by any particular settlement type and can be generated even where those involved do not dwell in close physical proximity. Geographical propinquity also does not necessitate a local social system, nor does localness necessarily generate communion. Moreover, we can note that there are many ways of reaffirming a sense of community through movement within boundaries, such as travelling along well-worn paths or roads. And places are also always interconnected beyond boundaries, to many other places through travel and imagined travel. Thus Raymond Williams in the Border Country is 'fascinated by the networks men and women set up, the trails and territorial structures they make as they move across a region, and the ways these interact or interfere with each other' (Pinkney 1991: 49; Williams 1988). Massey similarly argues that the identity of a place is derived in large part from its interchanges with other places that may on occasions be progressive (1994: 180). Travel, we might say, is central to communities, even those characterised by relatively high levels of propinquity and communion.

However, there are many forms of communication between people, including the personal messenger, letter, telegram, telephone, email, text messaging, radio, television and video conferencing (the last of these is said to have increased greatly since Sept 11). Thus travel only happens on occasions and this can best be explained through the concept of the 'compulsion to proximity', that people travel in order to be physically co-present with others for particular moments of time (see the classic Boden and Molotch 1994; as well as my efforts in Urry 2002).

Through travel people are physically co-present with work-mates, business colleagues, friends, partner or family, or they bodily encounter some particular landscape or townscape, or are physically present at a particular live event. What I call corporeal travel results in the anticipation of, and the realisation of, intermittent periods of physical proximity to particular peoples, places or events. Such proximity is felt to be obligatory, appropriate or desirable, not a matter of choice. Especially in order to sustain particular relationships with friend or family or colleague that is 'in the mind', that person has intermittently to be seen, sensed, through physical co-presence.

BT says 'it is good to talk' but it is especially good to talk through co-presence, through rich, multi-layered and dense conversations (Boden and Molotch 1994). These involve not just words, but indexical expressions, facial gestures, body language, status, voice intonation, pregnant silences, past histories, anticipated conversations and actions, turn-taking practices and so on. Co-presence affords access to the eyes. Eye contact enables the establishment of intimacy and trust, as well as insincerity and fear, power and control. Simmel considers that the eye is a unique 'sociological achievement' since looking at one another is what effects the connections and interactions of individuals. (quoted in Frisby and Featherstone 1997: 111). This is the most direct and 'purest' interaction. It is the look between people which produces moments of intimacy since: '[o]ne cannot take through the eye without at the same time giving'; this produces the 'most complete reciprocity' of person to person, face to face (Simmel quoted in Frisby and Featherstone 1997: 112). The look is returned and trust can get established and reproduced. Face-to-face conversations enable the talking through of problems, especially the unmediated telling of 'troubles'. In such conversations topics can come and go, misunderstandings can be corrected, and commitment and sincerity can be directly assessed. Also physical co-presence can demonstrate the lack of trust, that someone is not to be believed and the deal should not be done, the relationship ended.

Co-present bodies are actively involved in turn-taking within conversations, a tilt of the head indicating a willingness to receive an utterance. Likewise co-present people can touch each other, with a rich, complex and culturally variable vocabulary of touch. The embodied character of conversation is 'a

managed physical action as well as “brain work” (Boden and Molotch 1994: 262).

Participants travel to meet together, at work but in many other contexts. People commit themselves to remain there for the duration of the interaction, and each uses and handles the timing of utterances and silences to ‘talk’. There is an expectation of mutual attentiveness and this is especially the case within ‘meetings’. Such meetings are often multi-functional, for making decisions, seeing how one is heard, executing standard procedures and duties, distributing rewards, status and blame, reinforcing friendship as well as distance, judging commitment, having an enjoyable time and so on. They are typically information-rich encounters (Schwartzman 1986).

Research shows that managers in the US spend up to half of their time in face-to-face meetings and much of their time lies in working with and evaluating colleagues through extensive physical co-presence (Boden and Molotch 1994: 272). This reflects the apparent shift within how organisations work, from the ‘individual work ethic’ to the ‘collective team ethic’ in which face-to-face social and leadership skills are especially valued. Virtual travel is deconstructing organisations that were once huge centres of work and enforced proximity. Now organisational relations are most significantly made with consumers and this involves both branding and appropriate ‘navigation’. Neither of these demands the physical unity and organisational hierarchy of large numbers of workers within a single ‘co-present’ site (Evans and Wurstler 2000: 107-9). And the higher the position in an organisational hierarchy the more significant is establishing and nurturing ‘complex networks’, where unwritten and informal co-presence is especially salient.

Such networks also facilitate the ‘inadvertent’ meetings that occur because people from similar social networks are informally encountered in certain parts of towns or cities, on golf courses, campuses, cafes, bars, parties, book launches, conferences and so on (see Watts 1999, on the mathematical properties of the ‘it’s a small world’ phenomenon). Where people live geographically distant from each other, then sites of ‘informal co-presence’ are regularly visited. Research on the City of London in particular also shows how its intense communicative role has if anything been enhanced, with those working in financial services regularly travelling to meet up especially in informal ‘thirdspaces’ for intense moments of quality time (see Boden 2000; Thrift 1996).

Given then these arguments about the complex interweaving of presence, imagined presence, and intermittent absence, I turn to the nature of connections within generic electronic spaces.

Virtual ‘communities’

It is often claimed that so-called ‘virtual communities’ are not ‘real communities’ (Jones 1995: 24; Sardar 1996). Virtual communities involve more and more connections but these connections are said to ‘grow more fragile, airy, and ephemeral’, as electronic space is said to supplant the rich complex diversity of pre-existing social space (Heim 1991: 74). Virtual communities are thought to lack the substance of ‘real communities’ providing only a life on the screen (Turkle 1996).

However, it seems that intermittent co-presence is important in virtual spaces (Baym 1995: 157). People meet up from time to time, dwelling together in a shared place for periods. This ‘compulsion to proximity’ is said to reinforce the ‘magical, intensely personal, deeply emotional bonds that the medium had enabled them to forge among themselves’ (Rheingold 1994: 237). Thus even electronic spaces seem to depend upon moments of face-to-face co-presence for developing trustful relationships.

Indeed new electronic or virtual communities may presuppose an enhanced corporeal mobility of people (as well as the extensive use of phone conversations). Or to put the argument the other way round: an IT executive argues that the ‘daily information and entertainment needs of a traveller are typically multitudes greater than those of the average residential customer’ (quoted Graham and Marvin 1996: 199). The more people travel corporeally, the more that they seem to connect in cyberspace.

Thus there is not a fixed amount of travel that has to be met in one way or another, and that there could be the straightforward 'substitution' of virtual travel for corporeal travel. It seems that virtual and physical travel transform the very nature and need for co-presence. Koku, Nazer, Wellman argue on the basis of research on research scholars that 'Frequent contact on the Internet is a complement to frequent face-to-face contact, not a substitute for it' (cited Putnam 2000: 179). Other research suggests that those who are on-line are those most active in voluntary and political work within their immediate neighbourhood (Wellman 2001: 10). Their range of contacts may be predominantly local but significantly broader than those who are not online. Virtual connections would thus seem to promote more extensive local connections, contra Putnam, and hence more and not less corporeal travel.

But further broader changes seem to be occurring in what we mean by 'community' such that people increasingly interact and form 'communities', or 'small worlds' with those who are geographically distant (see Lodge's account of academic 'small worlds': 1983). This changing nature of community life can be seen within diasporic cultures. The proliferation of such diasporas has extended the range, extent and significance of all forms of travel for far-flung families and households. Clifford summarises the importance of travel: 'dispersed peoples, once separated from homelands by vast oceans and political barriers, increasingly find themselves in border relations with the old country thanks to a to-and-fro made possible by modern technologies of transport, communication, and labour migration. Airplanes, telephones, tape cassettes, camcorders, and mobile job markets reduce distances and facilitate two-way traffic, legal and illegal, between the world's places' (1997: 247; see Cohen 1997). In the case of Trinidad Miller and Slater argue that one can really only be 'Trini' by going abroad, with about 60% of nuclear families having at least one member living abroad (2000: 12, 36). But at the same time using the internet is becoming central to being a real 'Trini'. The use of the internet in Trinidad 'has permeated all sectors of society' as hot, stylish and fashionable (Miller and Slater 2000: 27).

Miller and Slater go on to argue that as virtual travel thus becomes part of everyday life so it transforms what we think of as near and far, present and absent. It changes the character of co-presence, even where the computer is resolutely fixed in place. Thus we should regard: 'Internet media as continuous with and embedded in other social spaces, that they happen within mundane social structures and relations that they may transform but that they cannot escape into a self-enclosed cyberian apartness' (Miller and Slater 2000: 5). Thus the very distinction between on-line and off-line gradually dissolves since 'many community ties are complex dances of face-to-face encounters, scheduled get-togethers, dyadic telephone class, emails to one person or several, and broader online discussions among those sharing interests' (Wellman 2001: 11).

Thus networked ties exist in and across both physical space and cyberspace. Virtual proximities involve multiple networks, where people can switch from one to the other, using connections from one network as a resource within another. Virtual travel offers various social affordances as cyberspace is transformed into multiple cyberplaces (see Wellman 2001). Thus electronic spaces are 'incontrovertibly social spaces in which people still meet face-to-face, but under new conditions of both "meet" and "face"', of changing kinds of connections at-a-distance (Stone 1991: 85).

Mobile machines

More generally, various technical means of communications are increasingly combined with humans, forming new material worlds. There are new modes of present and absent 'strangeness' (Bogard 2000). These machinic hybrids involve 'a contradiction between nearness and remoteness, or mobility and fixation...Cyberspace communications, in a word, are strange - at the push of a button, territories dissolve, oppositions of distant and close, motion and stasis, inside and out, collapse; identities are marginalized and simulated, and collectivities lose their borders' (Bogard 2000: 28).

Indeed more generally there are now almost always 'strangers' in our midst - on multiple screens not

only in the workplace or home but also in cars, airports, shopping centres, post offices, stores, garages, trains, aircraft and so on (see McCarthy 2001, on the widespread growth of such 'ambient television'). There is a curious 'flickering' combination of presence and absence. Bogard characterises such a collapse of distance as an impure or indeterminate relationship, neither one nor two, as a fractal space: '[t]his blurring of boundaries between the monad and the dyad is an excellent image of the rapidly evolving symbiosis of bodies and computers, groups and communications networks, societies and cybernetic systems' (Bogard 2000: 40). Connections are simultaneously private and public, intimate and distant. We could describe these as new fractal social spaces, as each realm folds over, under, through and beyond each other in striking new social topologies. These are oscillatory, flickering, both here-and-there, both inside and outside, rather like a Mobius strip.

The blurring of the boundaries between the monad and the dyad is especially marked with those newer communication devices that are small, mobile and embedded within, or part of, the very means of mobility. These involve what one might call 'replicated co-presence' involving mobile computers, palmtops, computer connections on trains and aircraft, cars as 'portals' to the net, the 'mobile internet' and so on (Gow: 2000). There is convergence between new modes of transport and communication and this further 'mobilises' the requirements and characteristics of co-presence.

Indeed I would suggest that the twenty first century will be the century of 'inhabited machines', machines inhabited by individuals or very small groups of individuals. It is through the inhabiting of such machines that humans will come to 'life'. Further, machines only function because they are so inhabited; they are machines only when one or more humans come to inhabit them. Such machines come to 'life' when they are humanly inhabited. These inhabited machines are miniaturised, privatised, digitised and mobilised. They include walkmans, mobile phones, the individual TV, the networked computer/internet, the individualised smart car/bike, virtual reality 'travel', tele-immersion sites, helicopters and smart small aircraft and other micro-mobiles yet to emerge. Such machines are desired for their style, smallness, lightness and demonstrate a physical form often closely interwoven with the corporeal (see du Gay et al 1997, and Bull 2000, on the Sony Walkman). As Hulme and Peters note that their respondents described their mobile-phones as prosthetic, as physically co-terminous with their body (2001).

These machines depend upon digital power that is substantially separate from material form or presence and involves exceptional levels of miniaturisation and portability. They serve to constitute what Makimoto and Manners term 'digital nomads' (1997). These machines re-order Euclidean time-space relations, bending, stretching and compressing time-space. Such machines means that inhabiting them is to be connected to, or to be at home with, 'sites' across the world - while simultaneously such sites can monitor, observe and trace each inhabited machine. These machines are producing a 'liquid modernity' of interdependent flows of text, messages, people, information and images (see Bauman 2000).

Some of these features can be seen in the relatively new 'mobile office'. Laurier and Philo examine how work activities once mainly carried out in offices are now conducted in company cars qua mobile offices (2001). The car is particularly good at being transformed into an office through its combination with the mobile phone. This 'has allowed the car-assemblage to become a much more effective mobile office' (2001: 26). Work materials can be synchronised and connected up to other company members while 'on the road'. The mobile and car-based telematics function as actants, taking messages as voice-mail, screening calls and providing information about traffic delays and alternative routings (especially with the increasing merging of various car-based mobile communications).

This 'mobile office' appears to be a system of multiple and overlapping mobilities constituting a workforce of apparently intense 'liquid modernity'. But the crucial point is that these workers are on the road in order to meet clients. This meeting occurs face-to-face at particular sites or in 'thirdspaces' establishing the personal touch to sustain trust. And along the road network there are

countless places for such meetings, motorway service stations, roadside cafes, pubs, restaurants and so on. The mobile is regularly used to rearrange the day as traffic often impedes the smooth planned for series of meetings and encounters, involving what has been called a 'playful opportunism'. And even traffic jams can be used to make numerous phone-calls, preparing for subsequent meetings. Team working is achieved by the skilful use of mobile telephony so as to maintain connections both with those back at the office (including making meeting arrangements, dictating letters and so on), as well as with others elsewhere on the road.

But even so this mobile life is felt by those mobile workers to be very lonely. It is often very hard to organise synchronous conversations on the mobile. While any number of phone calls and brief meetings can fail to provide the face-to-face sociability of physically co-present workspaces. A life on the road to meet others, does not provide the co-presence of the workplace which according to Cairncross is increasingly experienced as being more like a 'club', a place of co-present talk and complex exchanging of all sorts of information and communications (1997). And we might indeed hypothesise that the greater the hybridised mobility the more intense the need for moments of quality co-presence (as Boden 2000, argues with financial traders) Even so, the arrangements about such quality time, face-to-face meetings may be made flexibly, 'on the move'

Conclusion

Thus the dichotomies of real/unreal, face-to-face/life on the screen, immobile/mobile, community/virtual and presence/absence are not helpful here and need to be dispensed with. While as Nokia says 'It's good to connect' there are many interdependent ways of connecting that are increasingly part of a mobile life. Especially significant have always been the complex connections generated through physical travel so that people still meet face-to-face, body to body.

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