IN MY HEAD ABOUT THE 'CYBERHEAD':

RECONSIDERING TECHNOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS OF TIME AND SPACE

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Introduction

I saw what I call the 'cyberhead' everywhere, everyday; the shadowed forehead, downward-tilted neck and concentrated gaze. This habit of using technological devices, I recognized interrupted physical interactions and put many conversations on pause – dinner parties, ordering drinks at the bar, awkward coffee dates, business meetings and professors' teaching, all infringed upon and suspended. Experiencing this repetitive behaviour, I developed a negative strong opinion that associated technology and social interaction. Technology became synonymous with 'the villain' through my eyes. In other words, everywhere, every day in every way all I saw was how the developments of the iProducts (e.g. iPhone, iPad, iPod), the Google empire, texting, videoing, posting, connecting, linking, and tweeting, for example, wholly consumed and guided distracted behaviours, fragmented actions and impartial thought. Essentially, I thought, human bodies and minds are being taken over by technology. I utterly despised this phenomenon. It is what science fiction authors (e.g. Jean Baudrillard, Allison Muri, William Gibson) term as the 'human cyborg' (Muri 2003). This theorization of cyberculture (Muri 2003: 73), a 'post-human' state obsessed with, lost within, and dictated by digital connection, highlights what I began to feel so strongly towards.

For many weeks I became infatuated with solely encountering the negative aspects of the digital world. During my fieldwork across Western Europe, (i.e. Scotland, England, France, Belgium, Germany, Netherlands, Denmark and Norway) and sitting in cafes, on trains, at airports, eating food or walking in the city, I observed the 'cyberhead.' Characteristics of solitude, distance, and silence appeared as a thematic thread throughout the course of research. I extensively observed humans' interaction with a technological device such as phones, computers, tablets; the method included taking note of one specific person for 120 minutes and watching groups of people for larger period of times. Given my intense viewing behaviour, I predicted that there would be awkward moments of eye-contact. However, with the participants' eyes engaging in a fierce staring battle with a

technological terminal gazing back, my observational presence went largely unnoticed and often unsuspected. Often, people appeared to be disconnected from the physical and external world. There was minimal human-to-human interaction and colossal levels of isolation and alienation; a definite loss of sociability, I speculated.

What I observed in the field is similar to what the Amish community recognized; the introduction of information and communication technology (ICT) negatively altering sociability. It invited a form of horizontal relationships (Misra, Cheng, Genevie and Yuan 2014: 6) where superficial characteristics define relations. The social, personal realm began to be experienced through a transit site for interaction: the technological device. What the Amish aimed to eliminate was 'mobile relational interference' – a cell phone's distracting characteristics – in personal relationships (Hall, Baym and Miltner 2014: 137). Thus, after the introduction of telephones, in the Amish community, certain limitations were imposed to restrict the utilization of the phone, especially in the private context (Campbell 1994: 183). The ban of the phone in homes, for instance, aims to avoid 'micro-social fragmentation' in which materiality, the phone, occupies individual attention and diverts interpersonal attention simultaneously (Misra et al., 2014: 5; Strathern 1994: vii). Based on this ethnographic example, the Amish expose what I observed: the social dwarfed into the material world with technological integration.

To supplement this, consider an interviewee, Santhosh, based in the rural village of Hosanagra, India who stressed to me that 'people [in industrialized societies] confront their relationships as materialistic.' He elucidated that his hesitation to fully integrate into the technological age is correlated to a deep concern for humans moving 'away from the essence of life.' The Amish and a number of informants express their belief that the quality and genuineness of social interaction has regressed. Such data was exactly what I required to prove a theory I stubbornly held onto. I overwhelming wanted to expose a clear distinction of the negative effects of technology. More time spent in the field through participant observation, interviews and research, on the one hand, further supplied evidence for the hypothesis that technology is harming sociability. On the other hand, revealed an entirely different perspective on the reality and norms of technological dimensions of time and space.

Theoretical Starting Point – In my Head

In order to understand the shift in thought, it is necessary to further highlight elements of the original intended fieldwork investigation. Precisely, it is through exposing the negative sides of technology that the narrow, one-sided distinction widened. As the usage of ICT has become a part of the norm in the modern world, informants shared their feelings how face to face relationships have withered and device to face relationships have expanded. It is through this sense of technological control, and its respective implications, that many of my informants viewed an evolution of social relations. Alex, an informant, further commented in line with this technological deterministic view (Ingold 1997: 106), 'I truly fear that technology has built walls – ones we may not be able to take down.' It was a common view among many people interviewed that there are 'problems of technology.' As a dominating force it appeared to be endangering human nature. From 'losing touch' with other people to directing 'interaction with a device' and entering a 'closed' world, these informants referenced what Misra et al. (2014: 3) call 'cyber-overload.' The omnipresent accessibility of on-demand knowledge lures people to frequently tap into such a promising reality. It presents a compromise – multitasking and divided attention – between social interactions in the virtual and the physical.

In a world with an overwhelming presence of information and communication technology it seems society has entered a tailored way to create, maintain and build relationships. One particular informant, Jamie, passionately emphasized that by socializing technology the young generation is 'threatening our interpersonal communication skills.' Jamie continued, the extreme presence of technology is something to be aware of because 'it is a much larger issue.' One of the areas he was referring to is what urban vocabulary defines as 'cellfish: an individual who continues talking on their phone as to be so rude and inconsiderate of other people' (Dalton 2015). Scholars such as Goffman (1963), Hopper (1992), Katz (1999) and Humphreys (2005) have analysed this social behavior of an 'absent-presence', 'poly-consciousness', 'cross-talk' or 'dual front.' This can be understood as the effect of abandoning other individuals in person in order to attend to another individual via technology or reaching to check a silent phone, for example. Henri Lefebuvre's theorization of space offers insight into these dialectical forces – productive and contradictory – that ICT occupies (Munt 2001: 3-4). William Gibson (Muri 2003: 75) helps to clarify this juxtaposition

which I soon allowed myself to observe, 'the human body has never been so present, or so materially manifest at any time in history of humanity.' Thus it would be ignorant to merely concentrate on one aspect of the multifaceted dimensions of cyberspace. Essentially, social space is relational, adaptable and contextually dependent. As many informants pointed out, for instance, other forms of technological interaction occurring in technospace – the spatial and temporal dimensions of humans interactions with technology – are 'habitual', and even 'natural.' If it is an unconscious behaviour to act 'cellfishly' or to be 'copresent', yet most informants spoke of these interactions with ICT in a negative connotation, then why do so many people partake? What was I neglecting to observe? Technologies are undoubtedly criticized, yet there seems to be an abundance of fascination accompanying the critique (Humphreys 2005).

Up until the very last few days of fieldwork, I had chosen to assume that technology offered only negative effects. I created this unfavourable reality because I wanted to see, understand and later prove it. Once I distanced myself from this dominating presumption, however, I entered a new reality I had never accepted existed. In ethnographic fieldwork, I found it quite easy to get consumed in the theoretical stages and neglect much of the pragmatism. In other words, I was overly focused on theory and not enough engaged in the material and social world as it is. Numerous interviews and frequent observations led me to reconsider my deepening coldness for what I initially saw as technology's hegemonic influence. Throughout the ethnographic encounters process, I found myself moving from a technological deterministic to a technological possibilistic view (Ingold 1997). Namely, under the umbrella of a sociotechnical system concept it is not technology eradicating and dictating sociality, but rather the social nature of human beings constructing behavior and activities in a technological space (Pfaffenberger 1992). To reiterate, simply because the technospace is a modern development in the 20th and 21st century does not necessitate that social relations are determined by it as well (Munt 2001). Technological possibilism assumes technological relativism, not evolutionism (Ingold 1997). Human interaction does not patently decrease in value nor realness in the presence of a 'mirrored reality' by means of technology (Dallow 2001). As Munt argues, if 'culture is what makes us real' then the experience of a 'cyberhead' or digital culture constitutes reality (2001: xi). With this altered assumption about the actuality of technospace, a broadened understanding of human interaction with technology is available.

When investigating the perception of space, in this instance technospace, the categorization of time is similarly significant in bringing meaning to the complexity of the social, material world; especially since there is a spatial and temporal relationship in which information and communication technology participates in the transfer of knowledge. The diversity of geographic space is turning into an infographic frontier with constant accessibility and instantaneous connection (Dallow 2001). With new mediums of interaction, humans operate within and throughout multiple means, yet people have not submerged into a simulated existence within hyper-reality (Armitage and Roberts 2002; Dallow 2001). The immediacy of interaction and heightened freedom to roam (technological) spatial boundaries have facilitated an elevated pace of social space. Such conditions have been theorized by Foucault who highlights an 'epoch of simultaneity' (Munt 2001: 8). The technospace that society has constructed has been remediated (Gershon 2010) and interestingly what some informants have elucidated that it, 'defied scientific understandings of the [limited dimensions of] time and space.' ICT makes it possible to be in two place at the same time; I observed it in public and private spaces, for example: grocery stores and kitchens; lecture theatres and study rooms; train stations and cars, and it occurred in both physical and psychological space. Engaging in technospace presents the opportunity to be here and there, nowhere but everywhere (Muri 2003). As Foucault may add, 'we are in the epoch of juxtaposition' (Munt 2001: 8). Whereas before I imagined a machine-like human taken over by the 'villain' of technology, I suddenly began to recognize the 'supernatural' achievement of simultaneous time and space. In fact, scholars, Daniel Miller and Donald Slater (Gershon 2010:12), similarly view virtual communication as a 'social accomplishment', not an inferior means to social life. As an interviewee cleverly phrased it, 'kudos to the socialization of technology for normalizing the "impossible."'

The 'Cyberhead' Out of in My Head

The more I witnessed the spatial paradox of physical presence and psychological absence, the less I vehemently wanted to deem social interaction with ICT as negative in its entirety. As an ethnographer, it later became clear that in the context of modern technology, where temporal and spatial limitations are blurred, outlining binary oppositions (e.g. negative and positive, near or far, here and there, now and then) does not satisfy as an analysis for the implications of technology and social relations. The categories of time and

space work with and against each other while playing off one another. Often, in the presence of ICT, to be virtually near is psychologically connected and physically far; physically near is psychologically disconnected and virtually far. A two-fold distinction fails in these circumstances because ICT users can be virtually, physically or psychologically near, far or connected all simultaneously. It is constituted by being everywhere and nowhere synchronously. This is a unique harmonization of the spatial and temporal norms and possibilities, which is incredibly complex and occurs unpremeditatedly.

This conceptualization began to take form when I asked passengers using technological devices at the airport a simple question, 'Where are you?'

Most replied, 'At the airport', and many added in, 'I am flying to _____.'

Responses included cities of Edinburgh, Copenhagen, Stavanger, Paris, Berlin, London. To rephrase their responses, I firstly pondered, 'we are *here*, at the airport. We'll be flying *elsewhere*', and I agreed.

Every respondent shared an understanding that in the moment of our conversation, the identification of one's whereabouts was referable to *here*. On the one hand an airplane flight physically travels distance and throughout time in order to arrive somewhere else; moving in time through space. Likewise, at the airport (*here* in the present moment), I observed my informants moving from *here* to *elsewhere* even before boarding the flight. Consider how some were at the 'cinema', the 'library', others at 'home' or 'work', or at a digital site for interaction and communication, such as Facebook, Instagram or Google, all by way of technological devices. Honestly, this was a moment of mind boggling revelations: by the touch of a button – connecting to free airport Wi-Fi – people are able to go anywhere and see anyone without changing physicality and remaining just as physically engaged.

One informant, Matt, especially exemplified this notion. He shared that he was flying to see his girlfriend at their flat in London. They had been holding each other not hand in hand but by phone in hand: physically far in distance, psychologically close in space, virtually near through connection, and personally still in love. I saw a romantic digital touch that allowed geographical distance, infographic proximity and interpersonal connection to remain during his days away. Matt said, we could be 'everywhere together' by tapping into their ICT, meanwhile being nowhere 'remotely near to each other' in physical space. Although he was 'traveling' on the day he and I talked, he had already been 'traveling' to see her the days prior. He is one of many encounters that exemplify the paradoxical nature of

space and time in regards to ICT. With that said, ordinary characteristics of social relations occur in the virtual world, and it is this familiar place that recaptured fascination. Before I was tempted to scrutinize it, now it was engrossing.

These attributes and common space bring light to social norms surrounding human interaction with ICT. Consider a group of three friends, two female and one male, at *Cafe de Flore* in Paris, France, who sat together in physical silence by way of cyber loudness. I noticed from the minute they sat down their phones were their primary point of interaction. After ordering their speciality coffees and receiving the Wi-Fi password, they reached for their phones. Five minutes later, once their coffee arrived, they each quickly snapped a photo of their beautifully presented hot drinks and instantaneously uploaded it to Facebook and Instagram. Throughout the remainder of the interaction until they left, this photo occupied their space and time. Each one of them checked the increasing number of likes and comments on their media almost every three minutes. The conversation in between these brief interludes was minimal bar chat. In order to make sense of this encounter, I asked different participants to comment on the photo to the right.

Figure 1: Three Friends at Café de Flore

One informant, Megan, among others, emphasized how it is a 'nondescript scene' because it occurs in the everyday context. Megan shared a particularly honest view that resonates with the normative behaviour surrounding ICT, 'this photo is pretty uninteresting to me, kind of like whoever took [the photo] their camera went off by accident. I would literally look at this for two seconds, move on and forget about it.' Alex elaborated on this idea of social norms as she suggested that it looks 'incredibly generic, but this is most likely because it is socially acceptable.' What these respondents expose is the seemingly natural behaviour that acts on co-orientation theory (Hall et al. 2014:137).

To explain, depending on how a group perceives and utilizes technology in the presence of each other constitutes appropriate behaviour. They appreciate the friend group's identified 'idioms of practice' – social construction of agreement on appropriate interaction with ICT – which makes this ethnographic group's behaviour apposite (Gershon

2010). In other words, the three friends thus, either implicitly or explicitly, mutually deemed that being a 'cyberhead' at a cafe is okay , acceptable and in fact the norm for them. It has arrived at the point at which people unconsciously are aware of their simultaneity in space and time. It was a journey for me to truly accept that in the contemporary world of the 21st century, humans have numerous means for the same end of social interaction and that the medium one chooses to communication through is individual and contextual. Social space, as I learned, is relational and not absolute. Although I intended to highlight the negative side of this group's isolated behaviour, I instead opened a door to discover the individual reward each one felt in the culture they have constructed in technospace. I realized that attempting to create what the anthropologist hopes to find may in fact hinder what the anthropologist needs to see. As an outside observer, I now recognize I was too quick , who am I to judge the practices of other people?

At first, admittedly, I was extremely unimpressed at the amalgamation of social connections built through technological devices and connections built in person. But through a theoretical shift, I adopted the assumption that humans are social beings involved in networks of connections. In the contemporary world, ICT acts as a 'social nuclei' (Misra et al. 2014: 7); a central connection point for social relations and networks. People converse within these new spatial systems in ways that are metonymically reinstated: talking, chatting, messaging, showing, sharing, liking and posting (Dallow 2001). While I originally thought this realm of modern communication modes is experienced solely analogically, my informants provided that various mediums of social interaction are triangulated into a 'whole-encompassing conception of their social relationships.' In a similar manner, Dallow offers, 'social relations with others are absorbed into the person's experience of them' (2001: xii). Relationships created, built and maintained on ICT devices are actualized and indeed 'inextricably intertwined' with other means of social interaction (Gershon 2010: 13-14). Essentially what I unravelled is that while one can refer to a virtual, simulated world of communication, these 'computed' relations do exist and are more than mere thought. The social world involves a series of interconnections and networks, and technology is yet another means for networks to create further networks.

Conclusion

The process of conducting ethnographic fieldwork about human interaction with ICT was jumpstarted by a fiery passion towards the ubiquitous appearance of the 'cyberhead' across Western Europe. To only look towards the negative, I came to realize, is to neglect what makes the negative possible. Ethnographic fieldwork is not about striving to encounter what the anthropologist *wants* to encounter, rather, it is about taking the ethnographic subject or object as it is. After creating the reality I hoped to see it became quite clear how that reality only existed in my own personal thought. I was in my head about the 'cyberhead.' A simple switch in approach with an altered goal of intersubjectivity guided this fieldwork into an exposure of how the socialization of technology in a constructed world is in its essence about furthering socialization all together. Namely, through the normative implications, paradox of space and time, and realness of virtuality. Humans as social beings communicate and interact, it is the ethnographer's role to let this practice define existence rather than pure theory.

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