

DURKHEIM, MOBILES AND THE SPHERE OF THE SOCIAL

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The mobile and other new communication technologies such as the Internet are having unprecedented effects on society and culture worldwide. While some of the claims for these new communication technologies are wildly exaggerated, there is little doubt that they are changing our world significantly. This paper addresses some of the theoretical issues associated with the new communication technology and assesses their impact for the Philippines. Just as Durkheim and other early theorists responded to the changes resulting from the Industrial Revolution, one may expect a similar theoretical renewal to address contemporary transformations. The social sciences, in particular Sociology, will have to reconsider its basic paradigms to accommodate these transformations.

Keywords: paradigm shift, local cosmopolitanism, communication revolution, classical and postmodern theories, new socialities

DURKHEIM'S HERITAGE

The social sciences provided new paradigms to explain social transformations that were no longer explicable in traditional terms. Supernatural and other conventional models for human action needed to be redefined in the context of spreading literacy, colonial discoveries, economic expansion and political reforms. The social sciences provided more adequate models to explain the changes brought about by the industrial revolution. The shift from communal to contractual relationships generated new norms and modes of social organization. The movements from the countryside to the cities created new anxieties as traditional ties were replaced by new localities. According to Durkheim (1995) and later Levi-Strauss (1966), primitive societies

based on similitude created difference through appropriate social classifications such as crow and eagle hawk. The model of nature was imposed on culture to produce difference. Complex societies are already highly differentiated and the problem is to produce affinity. Each social formation has its own form of sociability adequate to meet systemic needs. Durkheim (1960) suggested that the shift from mechanical to organic solidarity require new forms of sociability. Labor unions and professional groups arose as replacements for earlier modes of association such as guilds and religious confraternities. But this major shift also created a normative vacuum resulting in feelings of listlessness and anomie. Sociology developed its models to accommodate these major shifts. Much has changed since then and, as expected,

social science must account for these changes in its explanatory paradigms.

Many are now claiming that ICT is bringing about fundamental changes to contemporary society. If nothing else, ICT certainly facilitates new forms of association, with its corresponding possible affinities. The former spatio-temporal constraints of association have been significantly altered by the new media and consequently, new forms of sociality may be expected to arise. Judging from the claims of some social theorists, we seem to be on the cusp of a new age, whose full implications are only slowly emerging. Just like previous epochal transitions, we can expect that this new epoch will generate its own singularities. For example, globality has made virtual and actual cosmopolitanism possible. A cosmopolitan sociality, at least one based on a sense of a simultaneous present, was not possible before the new media.

NEW MODELS, NEW MUDDLES

Social theorists have been proposing new models for understanding the contemporary condition since the early 1980s. Lyotard (1984) called for a complete overhaul and rejection of earlier paradigms and since then postmodernists have continued and even radicalized his critique. Others, like Habermas (1984, 1989) have called for a strengthening of the rationalist program and a revival of the project of the enlightenment. More moderate sociologists like Giddens (1990) have pointed out the ontological insecurities of our age and the

consequences of space-time distanciation. Hitherto physical co-presence was an initial condition for most relationships. Presently, most relationships do not require contiguity. The capacity for indirect relationships has generated the structures of modernity. However, the enthusiastic embrace of postmodern theories has been counterbalanced by a resurgence of earlier models like systems theory (Luhmann 1998). But just when it looked as though an entente cordiale between the postmodernists and the heirs of the enlightenment was being established, cyber theorists with ideas about the postcorporeal and the posthuman (Kirby 1997) burst on to the scene. Any hopes of a theoretical consensus are quickly diminishing. Basic concepts like society and culture were deconstructed and any thing goes seems to be the name of the game (Game 1991).

Social science has become only one of many available narratives for explaining our present condition, each reflecting the positionalities of their proponents. Cultural Studies encroached and even supplanted the privileged hold on culture previously enjoyed by anthropologists. This concept, which had been used by anthropologists to indicate the uniqueness of a distinct mode of life enjoyed by small cohesive communities, was adapted to large, complex societies, whose members are not only strangers to one another, but who live according to distinct values and norms. What their members have in common, is no longer a common habitus but a wide range of meanings and practices generated by

mediating institutions each with particular goals. Hence the family, schooling, mass media, the economy, the polity and other structures create meanings and practices no longer consonant with each other. The result is, as Markus (1997) has pointed out, a surplus of meaning and a lack of sense. Signifying practices are no longer tied to practical significations. We are generating meanings at a rate too fast for their assimilation into practical life. As a consequence, culture refers only to itself rather than to structures that in the past helped generate it. The hitherto close links between culture and social structure have been severed or transformed. It is this transformation that the new media celebrate and enhance. Henceforth only the virtual is real (Shields 2003).

MILLENNIAL TECHNOLOGIES

The early claims for the emancipatory consequences of CMICT (computer mediated interactive communication technologies) may now seem excessive. According to Barlow (1995: 36):

With the development of the Internet, and with the increasing pervasiveness of communications between networked computers, we are in the middle of the most transforming technological event since the capture of fire. I used to think that it was just the biggest thing since Gutenberg, but now I think you have to go back further.

Barlow equates the Internet with the domestication of fire, the very beginning of human culture and the start of our domination of nature. The control of fire gave humans a truly transforming

technology, resulting in basic anatomical and sociocultural changes (Goubsblom 1992). Human evolution took on a distinctive path thereafter. The control of fire was followed by the domestication of plants and livestock. Thus began the human project of controlling and dominating nature. Some claim the end of nature since this domination is now complete. As Saunders argues:

In the modern world, where we work, sleep or take our leisure depends more in the created spaces we have manufactured—the factory, the semi-detached house, the seaside resort—than on the natural or inherent characteristics of different locations (1989:222).

Following Barlow, one assumes that the electronic revolution will transform the human either into the posthuman or at least into the cyborg. The routine incorporation of dacron, steel and electronic devices (cochlear implant, pacemaker, silicon breasts, aluminum joints, artificial hearts, synthetic lenses, prosthetic limbs) into the human body transforms it from an organic unity into a techno-formation. The seamless merging of human and machine generate problems for an earlier understanding of culture as the domain of signification and nature as brute facticity. In the cyborg, the dialectic between culture and nature is established and transcended. Culture not only informs but also constitutes nature, which in its turn disinforms culture. Human purposiveness and brute facticity merge in the human-machine. The posthuman subject combines the corporeal intimacy of a tool with the

effectiveness of a machine. For these reasons, social theorists (e.g. Kirby 1997) are presaging the end of the corporeal and the birth of the postcorporeal or the replacement of the human by the posthuman. H.G. Wells' (Cochrane 1996) fears may have been exceeded – we are becoming a nation not of mechanics but of machines. Society has been transformed into a technoformation where culture has been reduced to data. As expected, critiques of this view have also emerged but even they concede that 'a regime of meaning is transformed into a regime of operationality...Flows do not mean. They work. They are operational' (Lash 2002: 216).

Perhaps this is the source of our unease; the fear of being displaced and outmoded by machines. Others make equally astonishing claims: "We are going to be Gods, we might as well get good at it" or "In another thousand years, we'll be machines or gods" (Gray 2002:9). These claims may be a bit premature for the Philippines, with its low rate of Internet (12; Khan 2006, Lallana 2004) and mobile phone penetration (50%) even if this usage is growing quickly (Pertierra 2006). Nevertheless, even in societies like the Philippines, new forms of techno science have enormous potentials for social and cultural change.

HYDRAULIC SOCIETIES AND FLUID CULTURES

Recent analyzes of contemporary society have suggested more fluid models to better describe the flexible ties joining their members. Castells (2000, 2001)

prefers the idea of a network rather than a centralized structure to understand the multiple strands linking society's members. Informationally generated social structures operate very differently from earlier modes. They are necessarily more flexible, less hierarchical and more adaptive. For Castells (2000: 508), 'the network society represents a qualitative change in the human experience.' While earlier societies had to adapt their experience to nature, contemporary society only adjusts to culture (having earlier superseded nature). "We are just entering a new stage in which culture refers to culture, having superseded nature to the point that nature is artificially revived as a cultural form...This is why information is the key ingredient of our social organization and why flows of messages and images between networks constitute the basic thread of our social structure.'

Bauman (2005) describes liquid society as 'the kind of life commonly lived in our contemporary, liquid modern society. Liquid life cannot stay on course because liquid modern society cannot keep its shape for long. It is a precarious life, lived under conditions of constant uncertainty. The most acute and stubborn worries that haunt this liquid life are the fears of being caught napping, of failing to catch up with fast moving events, of overlooking the use by dates and being saddled with worthless possessions, of missing the moment calling for a change of tack and being left behind.' Others, like Luhmann (1998) prefer to characterize our times as one of extreme contingency

or an age of the accidental (Virilio 1982). Nothing is necessary or universal.

Hannertz (1993: 105) describes how culture, hitherto collectively shared, is now individualized. 'As she changes jobs, moves between places, and makes her choices in cultural consumption, one human being may turn out to construct a cultural repertoire which in its entirety is like nobody else's.' While the uniqueness of individual experience is a feature of all societies and cultures, the contemporary emphasis on consumer choice and the wide variety of patterns of consumption available make this insight particularly relevant and appropriate for our times. As Bauman (2005) points out, while all societies consume, only contemporary capitalist societies are explicitly organized around consumerism. Furthermore as Miller (1997) has pointed out, consumption is now an integral aspect of our identity.

LOCAL COSMOPOLITANISMS

Even assuming that earlier millenarian assertions have proved unfounded, there are adequate grounds to believe that basic changes are occurring, if not entirely due to the new communications technology, certainly in conjunction with other elements such as globalization. Whether these changes are simply an extension of the industrial revolution and a global economy is debatable (Featherstone 1995). Giddens (1999) has argued that basic changes are taking place in social institutions such as the moves for democracy not only globally but also in aspects of everyday life such as the family.

New social relationships are emerging to challenge former identities. These changes are at least as basic as those brought about during the 19th century. Durkheim's notion of organic solidarity now applies globally rather than nationally and to more aspects of everyday life, from popular culture, to the economy and the polity. A common example is the prevalence of international call centers in the Philippines. Filipinos are being taught to cultivate foreign accents, work according to overseas schedules and support global political issues. Only their wages remain stubbornly local.

While the structures of globalization may have been established in the 19th century, an awareness of the world as a synchronic whole can only have been experienced in the 20th century following the rapid gains in communication technologies. The experience of a global simultaneous present is now almost banal. Live broadcasts of sporting competitions, entertainment, political crises, the weather and other events are a regular feature of daily life. Local events are sometimes first known by a global rather than by their national audience. This pace of globalization of the local and the localization of the global can only be expected to increase. This space-time contraction has led to the phenomenon of *glocalization* and a reduction in the importance of the national. A recent survey (*Philippine Daily Inquirer* 7 March 2003:1) indicated that Filipino Internet users are more aware of issues such as global warming (93%) than even their American (13%) counterparts.

According to Appadurai, "No idiom has yet emerged to capture the collective interests of many groups in translocal solidarities, crossborder mobilizations, and postnational identities" (Appadurai 1997:166). The language of nationalism and territoriality no longer expresses these complex, nonterritorial postnational identities. Globality cannot be expressed in the language of internationalism because the latter is still trapped in the logic of territorialized cultures (Tomlinson 1999). It seems that the global is a reality *sui generis*, a new form of sphere of the social, inexpressible in terms of earlier affinities. This new cosmopolitanism is no longer anchored anywhere, least of all in the former cultural or political centers. The true cosmopolite is at home anywhere and preferably elsewhere (on condition of having online access). The Internet allows locals to become virtual cosmopolitans by experiencing the world as a simultaneous present.

MOBILES AND THE WELTGEIST

As DiMaggio et al. (2001) have pointed out, rarely have social scientists had the opportunity to study a major technological event evolving before their own eyes. The Internet and associated communication technologies are reshaping and being shaped by their users at an incredible pace. These changes are taking place as we watch them close at hand and even participate in these activities ourselves. This presents an ideal case of studying social transformations whose major elements are observable and whose effects are revelatory of less transparent structures.

My choice of the Philippines is particularly apt for analyzing the transformations generated by CMICT (computer-mediated interactive communication technologies). These technologies are consonant with changes in the country and answer the demands of the times. They also encourage existing structures to flourish and display their full potentialities. The new communications technology has been rapidly accepted and its consequences can be easily observed. If DiMaggio's claim that the Internet and related technologies give us a unique opportunity to observe social change before our own eyes, then the Philippines is a good place to be. Similar claims are being made about the mobile in Africa and elsewhere. No wonder Katz & Aakhus (2002) describes mobiles as *apparatgeist*; they embody the contemporary zeitgeist or spirit of the age. The Internet and the mobile give us global connectivity. The drastic reorientation of the spatio-temporal order is resulting in the deterritorialization of culture, confounding the previous boundaries separating the local and national from the global. In this new context identities are no longer contained or reproduced by former structures and hierarchies.

Modern technologies were present in the Philippines soon after their invention abroad. Unfortunately, their effects were limited to Manila and mainly involved rich Filipinos. The majority of Filipinos may have been aware of the wonders of technology but seldom experienced these wonders themselves. But the mobile changed all this. In five years (1997-2002) mobiles exceeded the rates of penetration

achieved by TV in 50 years. Presently about 50 percent of the population has a mobile phone and real access is higher since most people readily share phones with friends and relatives. Hence, almost all households have access to a mobile. Landlines have become largely irrelevant for most Filipinos. The Internet is much less accessible because of the more expensive infrastructure necessary. Approximately 15 percent (Lallana 2004) has direct online access but Internet cafés are easily found and relatively inexpensive. Many Filipinos use these cafés to connect with a world outside their normal limits. These cafés also constitute new sites of sociability since even people with home access prefer to use the café for privacy and convenience. Increasingly, elements of this outside world are incorporated into their users' everyday life.

FROM THE WORD TO THE TEXT

From being a locally-based oral society, the Philippines has become the texting capital of the world, whose members send 10 times the SMS global average (Pertierra 2006). Nearly 25 percent of the Filipino workforce is abroad and their remittances (\$14 billion) are the most important source of foreign income, far exceeding both foreign aid (\$650 million) and foreign investment (\$1.2 billion). Maintaining and reproducing ties with local kin is a major use of the new communications technology. But it also generates new notions of identity and relationships. The mobile and the Internet have opened up

local society in hitherto unexpected ways. This has resulted in a local form of virtual cosmopolitanism.

MY PUBLIC SPHERE

The Philippines is a society with a strong private but weak public culture. The notion of a world inhabited by contemporaries sharing a common normative life-space but otherwise unknown to one another is not well developed in the Philippines. What one says publicly but does privately are not judged by the same values. The former is performance, the latter reveals normativity. At best, the public sphere is seen primarily as an extension of private networks. Most Filipinos see the public sphere as unclaimed territory open to predatory acquisition. Politicians are the most adept practitioners of this public predation but ordinary Filipinos are always trying to expand their private control of the public domain.

Consociation is the basis for generating common expectations and reciprocity is its primary value. An economy of gift rather than commodity exchange characterizes the social structure, including the public sphere and the economy. Notions of trust were severely limited and mostly only included kin and close friends. Dealing with strangers is seen as inherently risky even in the context of conventional roles (e.g. bank tellers, doctors, government officials, market vendors). Filipinos try to personalize these contacts either through intermediaries or ritualizing the exchange using cultural mechanisms such as *suki*

(a special relationship between vendor and customer) or *compadre* (godparent).

TRANSACTING THE OTHER

In ordinary conversations, Filipinos always locate themselves in kinship terms. Older and younger people are referred to by the appropriate kinship term. The kinship term used refers not to the actual kin connection but to its desired or assumed emotional closeness. Hence, distant cousins are addressed as brothers to convey the closeness of the relationship. These cultural mechanisms allow hitherto unrelated people to establish moral ties and hence expand structures of trust. Strangers are by definition not part of this structure of trust. While strangers may be seen as contemporaries, they are not consociates. It is consociation that eventually ensures trustworthiness. The process of converting contemporaries into consociates is a main concern of Filipino social life. This conversion is achieved through networking, an integral part of Filipino life in order to expand one's contacts. In the recent past, opportunities to transform strangers into consociates was limited both by practical as well as cultural constraints. People were less mobile and the rituals of sociability only covered certain cases. The mobile and the Internet are new ways of extending networks. Virtual consociation eventually leads to common expectations and a basis for reciprocity. Texting is a common way of expressing such consociation and reciprocity.

Until recently, consociation necessarily took a face-to-face model, where speech is the primary mode of interaction. Any situation can be interrupted by a claim to be heard. Talk is the most common way of relating among Filipinos and silence is the best evidence of a social rupture. Talk confirms social ties as much as it conveys information. In any case, the reliability of the latter depends on the strength of the former. Trust the messenger not the message. All of these points to the transactional model of Filipino society, with its complex strategies and alliances to ensure that networks of exchange and reciprocity are maintained and expanded. Economic interests, political power and social legitimacy all rest on these strong networks. In these transactions, Filipinos regularly overstate their claims, hoping thereby to ensure reciprocity. Rituals of hospitality transform strangers into friends and casual acquaintances become intimate buddies. These affirmations are understood by both partners simply as possibilities for future transactions rather than as firm commitments. They are part of a network that may be activated in the future.

VIRTUAL CONSOCIATES

The mobile allowed the expansion of networks previously impossible and the Internet made cosmopolitan exchanges quotidian. These changes summarize the major transitions from a pre-industrial to a post-industrial age. While this transition took nearly two centuries in the West, they took less than two decades in the

Philippines. While the new media make virtual consociation possible, these relationships still employ traditional notions of personhood. These changes were too quick to alter existing notions of subjectivity. Hence, westerners are surprised at how quickly their Filipino cyber acquaintances profess affection soon after their initial exchanges. The language of traditional hospitality has been translated into the net. These expressions of profuse affection are part of the ritual discourse of hospitality. Naturally, as in the West, not everything has changed but even persisting structures find themselves in different contexts. Moreover, this shift from talk to text transforms the oral into the textual, generating corresponding changes in the tone of social interaction. The model of social action hitherto based on face-to-face oral exchanges shifts to an exchange of texts whose meanings are more precise but also more constrained. The said replaces the saying (Ricoeur 1971). In face-to-face exchanges, the saying is as important as the said, while in textual exchanges only the said is conveyed. Many features of the awkwardness of face-to-face interactions are eliminated in textual exchanges. Declarations of affection, apologies and other self-revelatory expressions are easier to convey textually than in face-to-face exchanges. But since texts are usually more composed expressions of intent, they may also conceal more deliberately.

If Filipinos can not talk, they text. It is the texting that conveys the message. But in the text, the saying and the said coincide. This creates an ambiguity that

allows multiple meanings to operate at different levels. The locutionary and perlocutionary aspects may differ. An extreme example is provided by Rodel who missed his wife so much when she left to work in Taiwan that he flooded her with over a hundred texts daily protesting his love. Soon after, she refused to answer him and sent messages that she wanted a legal separation. Rodel was so shocked that he stopped texting her altogether. Their relationship improved and presently Rodel hears about his wife through the texts she sends their children.

WE ARE ALL STARS

Pinoy Idol based on American Idol is very popular in the Philippines, as are various reality shows. The conversion of ordinary talents into media stars is a popular aspiration. The invention of the videoke has transformed private performances into public events. Most shopping venues, malls and other public spaces often have videoke machines that allow passersby to display their singing skills. This technology allows people to become, at least for a few minutes, media stars. Private fantasies become public performances. In these performances, the audience is composed of fellow stars.

Most uses of the mobile and even the Internet involve close friends and relatives. Moreover, these exchanges are usually banal and only rarely creative or innovative. Nevertheless they play an important function in continuing and cementing these relationships. They also reinforce the importance of private networks by extending them into hitherto

non-accessible areas of everyday life. This extension of the private into the public is an important feature of Philippine life. The country's leading newspaper commentators frequently use their columns to inform friends and acquaintances of their interests and activities. The notion of an anonymous readership is rarely assumed by Filipino writers.

Others have also noted the provincialism (Rodis 2007) of Filipino journalists. They belong to a small circle of metropolitan commentators who view national events from a local perspective. Their columns are personalized accounts of events meant for like minded acquaintances. Private concerns are often projected as public interests. Journalists are like media stars whose private and public lives are interchangeable. This conflation of private and public is a major aspect of Filipino life. Members of large email groups regularly use them to convey private information appropriate only for selected readers.

TECHNO RELATIONS

In a recent paper, Miller (2007) distinguishes between the use of mobiles to extend already existing relationships such as contacting family members, from uses involving strangers or others not normally accessible without the technology. The former are certainly the main use for Filipinos. Most of the texts they send are to family members or close friends. These involve the exchange of mostly banal information, prompting Koskinen's (2007) comment about the

explosion of banality associated with mobiles. This usage seems to be mainly concerned with confirming already existing ties. However, this confirmation may not have been so easily possible in pre-mobile times so the technology can still be seen to have introduced new conditions of possibility. Already existing relationships are extended beyond earlier possibilities. An effect of the telephone, once it became a common domestic technology was its use in maintaining close family ties, particularly between mothers and daughters in an age when mobility was separating hitherto spatially close kin (Erwin 2000, de Sola 1977). Ironically, this physical distance may have facilitated an emotional closeness that was unnecessary in earlier days. The telephone maintained pre-existing relationships but also gave these relationships a novel twist, transforming spatial distance into emotional closeness. Ling (2008) has recently argued that mobile messages perform important ritual functions in societies where meaning has lost much of its collective significance. Banal but regular text messages provide the ritual context that give meaning to otherwise unconnected individuals.

We observed the same transformation in the Philippines. Filipinos rarely express emotional closeness in face-to-face communication. But they regularly send texts to relatives and friends expressing their affection, love and devotion. Informants admitted how much easier it was to express these feelings through texting. Others have noted how romance is now mainly conducted through texting (Solis 2006). The mobile also facilitates

reconciliation since it allows both parties to admit fault and ask for forgiveness, an awkward and difficult thing to conduct face-to-face. Others also report similar instances of young people terminating relationships via SMS, the most serious being young Filipinos who text before committing suicide (*The Philippine Star* 29 June 2006). Malaysian Muslims (Wednesday, 11 July 2001, 14:00 GMT 15:00 UK *Anger over mobile divorce ruling* B.B.C.) may now divorce their wives simply by sending the appropriate text message. These are all examples where the technology, while extending or terminating an existing relationship also transforms it through its conditions of possibility. While, as the Nokia ad asserts, mobiles connect, they also disconnect. Just like the earlier telephone, the facility of communication now makes it imperative to regularly connect simply to maintain existing ties. This compulsion to communicate has given rise to an explosion of the banal.

Miller (2007) also mentions using mobiles not so much to extend but also to initiate an otherwise improbable relationship. Miller distinguishes between existing relationships continued on the mobile from those either initiated or only made possible through mobiles. It is common in the Philippines to receive texts from complete strangers. Many respond and sometimes these exchanges generate new relationships. Actual meetings are referred to as eye-balling and they sometimes result in stable friendships. However, as often, both parties seem as interested in the texting itself as they are in the emerging

relationship. They are not necessarily interested in meeting (eye-balling) but continue to text one another regularly. In this case, they relate primarily through texting or what Miller argues is a relationship with the object itself, such as a mobile. These relationships with material objects are common enough (e.g. men with their cars, women with shoes). Whether the relationship is with the mobile or with the activity it allows a moot point. What is certain is that cars and shoes become important extensions of their owners. People take special care of their mobiles, treating them as extensions of the self or as ritualized objects. The important thing is that the mobile allows for virtual relationships hitherto not possible.

TRANSFORMING TECHNOLOGIES

The examples to be discussed below are not unique or new since similar cases have been discussed in the literature. Cybersex, virtual identities, online marriages and sensorial extensions enabled by CMICT have been a major topic of earlier discussions. What distinguishes these cases is that they occur in a particular cultural context not originally figured in the technology. They are incidental and unintended consequences of technology.

Vilma, a retired school teacher keeps her mobile on 'a small soft chair on my headboard. The acetate angel guards my phone that is made more visible by white backlights' (Pertierra et al. 2002:64). Vilma has named her mobile Linus, after her favorite comic character. While Linus has his blanket,

Vilma has her mobile – these objects provide comfort and security to their owners.

Mane was devastated when he lost his mobile. 'My cellphone was stolen last night. I had not realized how integral my cellphone is to my life until now...I could not sleep last night...I kept thinking and thinking about what has happened...My cellphone is, of course, a communication tool...But that is not its most important feature. It is so highly personalized...it is like I lost a chunk of myself' (Pertierra et al. 2002:68).

These cases indicate how integral the mobile has become in people's lives. Being retired, Vilma misses her colleagues but her cellphone reconnects her with old friends. She treats it like a trusted companion. Mane also depends heavily on his mobile. It projects his image, displaying how cool he is: 'I feel naked when I do not have it.' The mobile becomes an extension of and envelope for him.

Sarah worked in Hong Kong for several years but returned to her village when she discovered that her husband was frittering away her remittances on his own pleasures. She separated from her husband and is working in a nearby town while awaiting her permit to return to Hong Kong. To wile away her time and to dispel her frequent bouts of depression, Sarah texts. When she does not have her mobile, Sarah loses her interest in texting. But when the mobile is returned she resumes her frenzied texting. When asked what the cellphone does for her, does she feel any different without the cellphone, she replies: 'Yes, if there is no cellphone, I also do not think of my boyfriend. My daughter borrowed my

cellphone for a month; I did not look for him – never mind I said. But if I have the cellphone with me and no load, I feel that I must load' (Pertierra 2006:110).

MANAGING INFORMATION OVERLOAD

In an earlier publication (Pertierra 2006), I argued that the mobile represents a technology of transformation. It not only alters our relationship with the physical world but also shapes our notion of an innerself. While other technologies mainly affect our capacity to transform nature, the mobile is primarily concerned with transforming culture through communicative practices. While not denying its instrumental uses, like the telephone, its use in communicating banalities or the ordinary aspects of everyday life is an equally important function. In an age characterized by information overload, with its excess of meaning but lack of sense, banality, as Koskinen (2007) and Ling (2008) argue, performs a useful role. It gives us a sense of reassurance in an otherwise chaotic and incomprehensible world. In a world replete with meanings, only banalities make sense.

But like many other technologies, the mobile also possesses its own agency. More accurately, technologies allow human agency to be exercised and extended into new domains. Communication technologies in particular, retain a close association with human subjectivity, often resembling tools as much as machines. Other

technologies introduce new experiences which then become incorporated as part of the lifeworld. The rise of the railways required the standardization of schedules and consequently of time. While the first trains were seen as disrupting the natural rhythms of the countryside, they soon provided a framework for rural life. With their fast but smooth travel, they also provided new perspectives for admiring the landscape (Holmes 2005). Speed, as Virilio (1986) argued, is not only a relationship to material space but also to our sense of attachment. These are arguments for a form of technological determinism, whose consequences are often unpredictable. Technologies open new conditions of possibility which are unexpected and irresistible but which in time are absorbed as part of ordinary human experience.

LOVE ON THE NET

Arnold and Miguel continued their relationship while Arnold studied abroad. Their virtual relationship extended former elements but introduced new ones, thus transforming the resulting relationship.

My online relationship with Miguel has evolved from having a tightly organized routine to a more spontaneous one. During the first three months in Hong Kong, I stayed in the library everyday to wait for our chat session that started at 6 pm. In addition, we emailed each other in the morning to say "I love you" and to inform each other of the day's activities. During our chat, we frequently vowed our love for one another, talked about what we did during the day and our plans for the next.

The Miguel on my computer screen is different from the 'real' Miguel. In a sense, I find the former more appealing than the latter. His face is sweeter on cam, his skin more smooth, and I do not see the imperfections in his body that I notice when I am with him. He frames the camera so that his face looks smaller and more boyish. Filmmakers have long known how to make people look more attractive on screen than they really are. The image is often more beautiful than the real.

Surprisingly, my interaction with Miguel online has not become more intellectual or more intense. We basically chat about old topics – what music he likes, how he travels home, what he has for dinner, etc. The experiencing of Miguel in my computer screen is totally unlike experiencing Miguel corporeally. When I am with Miguel, he is the most important person in my life. In contrast, when he is online, Miguel consists of a small yahoo messenger window which occupies a fraction in my computer screen. At the same time as chatting with him, I also chat with other people – sister, strangers, friends or read the news, listen to music. Miguel is transformed into a world of words and pictures, as part of other words and images on my screen. My textual response to him is at the same level as my reply to an email or my need to read the news (Pertierra 2006:123).

The account above reveals several changes in the relationship between Arnold and Miguel. These changes may be attributed to the very process of communication. To begin with their exchanges are routinized and soon become predictable. The ease with which they can connect makes this event quickly

banal, in the absence of more creative strategies. These exchanges are mainly textual, with occasional images and emotions. In other words, the relationship comes under more critical awareness and control. Following Ricoeur (1971), the model of the text generates the communicative exchange and hence the social relationship.

Arnold and Miguel continue their sexual encounters online and certain aspects stimulate both partners equally. Miguel appears more physically attractive online than in the flesh, certain features such as penile size, skin smoothness and musculature are enhanced. They imagine and hence experience themselves as more exciting lovers.

But these communicational encounters are only part of Arnold's attention since he often maintains several conversations simultaneously. These include his sisters and other friends. Miguel is sometimes reduced to being a small window in the computer screen. This image competes for attention with others such as email or the news. Online, Miguel is no longer the center of Arnold's gaze. Today, face-to-face meetings are regularly interrupted by mobile calls and other intervening events. Following Fortunati (2005), face-to-face interactions are already embedded in mediated communication structures. We are surrounded by images, sounds and messages that impinge on and mediate face-to-face encounters.

Modern technology has allowed Arnold and Miguel to continue their relationship despite being separated by

hundreds of kilometers. They can enjoy an intimate visual co-presence. In a way, it is as though they are still in Manila communicating daily by telephone. Some aspects of their relationship have remained the same while others have changed. The problem of banality that threatens most routine relationships also presents itself online. Arnold seems to be better able to deal with it than when confronted by Miguel's physical presence. In some ways online relationships allow for greater emotional frankness but they also facilitate deception. Many online relationships base themselves on previously existing ones but they also add new and unforeseeable elements. According to Constable (2005) crosscultural communication is facilitated online, making possible amorous quests that earlier may have been awkward or impossible. Filipino and Chinese women are able to initiate relationships with Westerners, difficult in normal circumstances. Cyber relationships involve a certain detachment or corporeal absence that encourages tentative discursive commitments. Differences are initially effaced and only gradually introduced as the communication process proceeds. But physical presence, when interlocutors finally meet, may create other difficulties.

Arnold is better able to craft his responses to Miguel when not confronted with the latter's physicality. Face-to-face communication involves simultaneous symbolic exchanges on several levels, the linguistic, visual, phatic, semiotic and proxemic. These communicative

exchanges operate on distinct codes and are more difficult to consciously and deliberately coordinate. While this form of communication is perhaps the most satisfying, it is also the most unpredictable (Heim 1991). Online exchanges reduce this capacity for simultaneous messages and bring the communication act under more conscious control. It also facilitates deception because motives can be disguised or unacknowledged.

INTERNET CAFES

Internet Cafés have become a common feature of most Philippine cities. People in Tuguegarao, a small city north of Manila use these cafés to remain in contact with friends and family abroad, to supplement the meager resources of local libraries, play games, search for porn, access useful information and as a place to meet friends. Janna is a young married woman (de Leon 2007: 68):

I go to the Internet café to download software, music videos, games and also to play with other gamers who I now consider friends. Actually I feel more 'free' in Internet cafés since I could open and browse any site I wish to visit. Although my personal computer is protected with several anti-viruses, I am still very cautious, especially that all important files are stored in it. My husband and I love online or network gaming and we do it in the Internet shop. Battle Realms, DOTA and Need for Speed Underground are a few of our favorites. We like to compete with each other and since we have only one computer at home, we go to net cafés to play. I tried playing alone, but I get bored easy. With someone to compete

with (not the computer), I can really be motivated to do well and win. One time I beat my husband, he got all boos, and hurrahs for me, he suddenly turned red because of embarrassment. I pitied him but I was too overwhelmed by the other gamers' applauses.

From then on, everybody wanted to play with me but I never beat my husband again...it is a matter of choice. I am actually withdrawn around people but in my constant visit to Internet cafés I eventually gained friends especially those I played with. Most of them are males and in their late teens. Considering my personality I did not imagine I could be friends with them. Our interest in computer/online games creased out unfriendly encounters.

For Janna, the Internet Café is a new domain for exploring new relationships as well as for asserting new aspects of herself. She feels more confident in the Café and meets new friends. Her relationship with her husband takes on a more egalitarian aspect even as she continues to defer to him in important ways. But it is the capacity to form new friendships both online and on site that the Café exercises generative powers. Married Filipinas are very circumspect about relationships with young men unrelated to them. That Janna feels comfortable in befriending her Internet buddies indicates a new sense of individual confidence. The important thing is to contain these relationships within their appropriate sites, in this case the Internet Café. In this sense we can say that Janna's relationships are virtual in two senses—because they occur in cyberspace and because they are limited to the Internet Café.

CYBER-COSMOPOLITANISM

Filipina mail order brides were a common, if controversial, issue during the 1980s and 1990s. Much of the controversy eventually died down as these contracted marriages generally fared no worse than more conventional ones. However, this issue has been resurrected in association with female trafficking. The Internet greatly facilitates transnational marriages and includes the possibility of exploiting unwary users. Nevertheless, online marriages have become increasingly common and are now part of the wide repertoire of conventional courtship. Chen (2004) has studied Taiwanese online marriage sites. They combine traditional features such as marriage brokers with new technologies like the Internet. Clients are able to meet their possible brides online and arrange quick visits to Vietnam to meet their families. These sites are a response to shifts in marriage practices among Taiwanese women who are no longer willing to accept the traditional burdens of marriage. On the other hand, Vietnamese women are keen to improve their economic prospects and are willing to marry Taiwanese men. These marriages are arranged according to traditional rural custom except that the brides are recruited overseas. Chen argues that while these marriages conform to previous practices, their increasing commercialization poses new problems. In this case the Internet opens itself not only to new marital possibilities but also to new forms of economic exploitation.

Imee is another frequent user of Internet Cafés. She had a bad marriage and uses the Internet to make new friends online. She claims that the Internet made her less lonely and opened possibilities for new relationships.

I met Roger, a black American affiliated with NBC, on a certain website. After a few emails and night chats, he came to the Philippines twice and we had a great time. But after a year, the flame just died down. And then I met Brian (from Victoria, Canada) from the same website, but we chat only as friends. Realizing I could be happy with someone else, I filed for annulment/presumptive death. (Her husband had disappeared years earlier)

It was December 2005 when I met my second (soon-to-be) husband, Marc (Australian-based French chef), at match.com.au. We started exchanging messages, pictures even sharing our experiences and life stories. We came to know each other mainly through the Internet. After three months of exchanging emails, talking on the net and chatting, Marc came to the Philippines and professed his love. That was then I knew this is not a dream. Then, I brought him with me to Cagayan where he met my family, friends and relatives. Next thing I knew, I was flying with him to Australia (de Leon 2007: 74).

De Leon (2007: 72) also provides an example of how the Internet has expanded the world of deaf Filipinos like Flora:

‘Though I do not chat with normal people, the fact that I could use the Internet the way they use it, I do not feel neglected or isolated at all. When I’m on the net I do not feel disabled or

left out. The Internet opened doors for me. Before, I had very few people whom I can call friends. With the Internet, I was able to meet other people like me. My circle of friends widened – from everywhere in the Philippines to people abroad. I often share my problems with them since they can connect with me given the fact that we are in the same condition.

I have a cellphone but I still prefer the Internet to talk with my friends. It is a lot easier that way. I just log on to my account in camfrog.com and with a webcam, my friends and I can talk (through sign language) for hours. I am a regular customer here [Internet café] and I start chatting usually from 10 in the morning to around 4 or 5 in the afternoon. So you see, I spend most of my time with friends, though in a mediated way, I still feel that we are actually 'conversing' face-to-face.

I did not go to a school for the hearing impaired, that explains my weakness in using the cellphone and the keyboard. I'm not textual. I am not familiar with the alphabet and I use Filipino Sign Language (FSL) since I'm not educated. In the Center, they teach the American Sign Language (ASL). So when I chat with friends, we do the FSL of course with a webcam. And when I have to ride a tricycle, I let my other friends who know the alphabet write down the address of wherever I'm going and just show it to the driver.

Web cameras provide Flora with a 'window on everyday life' not otherwise accessible. 'Through it, everyday life and mediation become integrated and metonymic since the filming of everyday life, as well as providing a window on the life of the protagonist, also includes the camera as an actor in the network of

relations' (de Leon 2007: 74). The camera both mediates and is an integral part of the relationship. As in the case of Miguel and Arnold, this mediation may increase the intensity of experience by highlighting perceived elements.

CONCLUSION

While the more extreme predictions about the new media have proved to be unfounded, it appears that social relationships are changing significantly. Previous spatio-temporal barriers preventing communications have been surmounted, often in unpredictable ways. These changes are taking place simultaneously at a global level but with distinct emphasis. Both the extent and the speed of these changes are unprecedented. Moreover, we are both privileged observers and participants in these changes. Durkheim predicted that new spheres of sociality would accompany changes in the signification of difference and in the corresponding generation of affinity. It seems that Durkheim was right. There has been an explosion of new socialities both actual and virtual. These socialities connect physical bodies with their cyber equivalents. They involve corporeal and postcorporeal identities, strange hybridities and new psychopathologies such as Internet addiction, cyber rape, endo-cannibalism and suicide texters. However, most of these new differences are easily incorporated within recontextualized structures. But, contrary to Durkheimian functionalist theory, societal forces are now as likely to induce

change as to restore stability. System autopoiesis is increasingly capable of absorbing change as part of its operationability. In Bauman's terms, societies are in a condition of dynamic fluidity.

As a consequence of these global forces, the Philippines can no longer be described as a local, orally-based society. Locality and orality still play important roles in contemporary life but they no longer exhaust its possibilities. Most Filipinos still mainly trust friends and relatives but others, including strangers are entering this circle of trust. The case of Imee, while not yet common, indicates how strangers now more routinely enter into peoples' lives. Janna and others regularly interact with their text or chatmates, leading to new relationships. In these encounters they often reveal aspects of themselves not generally shared even with friends or family members. Flora, who can only communicate using Filipino sign language, uses the webcam to maintain and expand her circle of deaf friends. The webcam is her window to a new virtual world.

Texting has become a common way both of continuing and expanding social relationships. It is part of a new form of courtship. With established friends, it allows for intimate exchanges normally shunned in direct conversation. With textmates, it opens a virtual world with

new possibilities. These cases indicate that the virtual must now be included as part of the actual. Spatial boundaries formerly limiting interaction have been effectively transcended, including previous barriers such as unfamiliarity and strangeness. The unfamiliar and the stranger are now routinely incorporated into many people's lives. But the local persists. Hence the new reality may best be called local cosmopolitanism.

The new media have made new forms of sociality possible. Unlike earlier forms, mostly confined to physical co-presence, the sphere of the social significantly extends co-presence, to include its virtual expressions. Virtual co-presence elicits new forms of the presentation of self, including expressions of intimacy. It also encourages explorations of new relationships and identities. Moreover, virtual co-presence occurs in the context of physical co-presence, where friends congregate in Internet Cafés, sharing virtual relationships with their cohorts. Bodies remain in place but with new meanings. In this new cyber and ethereal world, Marx's prediction—all that is solid melts into air—has taken on new significances. As in the past, new prophets will announce the beginning of redemption. Perhaps, the millenarian and chiliastic claims of cyber theorists are indications of these new age prophets.

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