# Self and Community in the New Floating Worlds

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New technologies arrive in elegant wrappings of promise. The new software promises greater processing speed, the latest television a sharper picture, the new car less engine noise, and so on. We are drawn to the pleasures of such promises. However, the cost/benefit analysis from which we proceed at this point of possible ownership severely limited. The absent voices largely go unheard. If we take "the latest" into our lives, how will they be changed - personally and collectively? Of prominant importance, we seldom ask about the repercussions of our choices for the quality of life. Only within recent decades have scholars turned concerted attention to the societal transformations facilitated by the ever increasing appetite for technological "progress." The critical and cultural analysis of television opened the door to significant scholarship. More recent analysis has turned to the impact of the internet.

Mobile communication is now on the horizon of critical scrutiny. In part the relative inattention to date may derive from the fact that mobile phones may seem but a minor technological improvement. They simply sustain the traditional telephonic process, but without the bother of line-locked instruments. Yet, we can scarcely afford a dismissive attitude in this matter. Mobile phones are now used by over a billion people world wide, and the growth curve is steadily increasing.[1] As the Katz and Aakhus (2002) compendium makes clear, the mobile phone is subtly insinuating itself into the capillaries of daily life, altering our forms of life, and bringing about new possibilities in its wake.

In the present offering I wish to focus on reverberations of mobile communication, and most particularly the mobile phone, in two closely related domains.[2] First, I will examine in more detail the role of mobile phone usage for contemporary transformations in communal life. Here I will introduce the metaphor of the floating world, which will facilitate an understanding of a new form of communal life made possible by the mobile phone. The implications of the new floating world for the socio-political landscape will also be focal. I then wish to take up the closely related topic of the self, exploring the ways in which mobile phone usage lends itself to the erosion in the traditional Western conception of "autonomous man." As I shall propose, mobile phone technology offers a cultural counterpoint to scholarly attempts to develop a conception of relational being.

# Community in Transit: The New Floating Worlds

In earlier work (Gergen, 2001) I proposed that many of the major technologies of the 20th century functioned corrosively with respect to the traditional, face-to-face community. Traditional communities are geograpically defined (e.g. "my neighborhood) and can be characterized in terms of their high degree of stability, reiterative communication, shared beliefs and values, mutual understanding and support, and shared knowledge about the participants. With the advent of the radio, the automobile, rapid transit, mass publishing, television, jet transportation, and the internet in particular, the traditional community was placed in jeopardy. All of these technologies functioned to remove individuals from their location within the community. Such removals were both physical (through mass transportation, jet transportation, etc.) and psychological (through radio, television, the internet, etc.). As workers of the nation became increasingly mobile, executives became increasingly global, and the activities of mothers and children were more widely dispersed (supermarkets, district schools, after-school activities), the population of active and available neighbors was substantially reduced.

One of my favorite illustrations is furnished by my wife, who grew up in a small community in Minnesota. The houses on her street typically featured a screened in back porch, and in the summer families would often take their meals in the cool of the porch. As the meal was complete and talk continued, there was frequent "visiting." Neighbors from one household would come over to share the news, laugh and commiserate. As national radio broadcasts became increasingly effective as vehicles for entertainment, the visiting was reduced. Jack Benny, George and Gracy Burns, and their associates were just a little more entertaining than the neighbors. With the entry of television , air conditioning and the TV tray, back porch dining became a rarity. The neighbors could scarcely compete with this techno-cocktail. When we recently returned to "the old neighborhood," and talked to the residents now living in the family home we found they scarcely knew their next door neighbors.

Community dissolution is matched as well by the demise of its heart: the nuclear family. In many homes in the US there are multiple televisions in the house - so that family members can maximize individual choice. There are also alluring possibilities for the children to live private lives in their tech-furnished bedrooms - CD players, computer games, telephone, amplified guitar, etc. There is often a family computer as well, with high competition among family members for internet access. Even within the family, geographic propinquity now means little. In large measure, each family member lives a psychologically separated life.

As I proposed more recently (Gergen, 2002), it is in this context that the mobile phone is of unusual importance. It is almost unique as a technology of communal restoration. It offers the possibility for continuous and instantaneous reconnection of participants within face-to-face groups. Within moments, relationships are re-enlivened, common opinions and values shared, expressions of support and mutual

understanding enhanced, and knowledge of the other deepened. In a Bakhtinian sense, while most of the broadly shared technologies are centrifugal in their effects, disrupting and dispersing conventional systems of meaning, the mobile phone tends to function centripetally. It reinstantiates the commonalties and secures them more steadfastly. More broadly, it may be said, that the mobile phone has lent itself to the pervasive state of an *absent presence*, the continuous presence at hand of family, friends and colleagues who are physically absent.

Yet, this restoration of community deserves closer examination. For it is clear that we are not witnessing here a re-flowering of the traditional face-to-face community. Rather, to borrow a descriptive phrase from 19th century Japan, we are witnessing the emergence of a "floating world." As in the Japanese case, it is a world of social interchange that escapes the control of government and military/police authority. People are free to speak of all matters great and small, regardless of whether they are lovers exchanging sighs of longing, family members arranging a rendezvous, or drug dealers negotiating sales. And, except for a significant number of business travellers, it also resembles the floating world of Edo, Japan, in its functioning around an axis of petty pleasure. In large degree, mobile communication is informal, un-scripted, and used in ways that enhance the pleasures of relationship (.e.g. romance, friendship, family life, colleagueship.) Lovers or spouses may call each other several times a day, using justifications that seem only to mask the enjoyment that is their aim. As Puro (2002) has described Finnish mobile phone users, they seem to "create an obligation for talk without a reason for a talk." (p. 27) In this sense, the cell phone community is largely an expression of what the Japanese call, *ukiyo-e* , the more worldly but less enduring pleasures of life. Finally, as in the Japanese case, there is no stable center of communal life. There is no specific geographical location or membership group to which the concept of community can be attached. The community is always there in a potential state, brought into being only in those moments when two or more participants are in communication.

Yet, the floating world of mobile phone users is also significantly different from the Japanese case. Most importantly, the floating world of informal life in Edo, Japan was literally "grounded." That is, the creation of community was always spatially circumscribed - by tea house, Geisha quarters, baths, brothels, gardens, and so on. And these arenas were limited to the Tokyo metropolitan area. Yet, the floating world of the mobile phone user is approaching the point of geographic irrelevance. Its participants may be almost anywhere at any time. Like the hovercraft or the pneumatic rail system, they are elevated from the physical terrain; there is no specific location with which they can be identified.[3]

We may imagine here that dwelling about us at all times are small communities that are unseen and unidentifiable. However, as we stroll the thoroughfare or sip coffee in a cafe their presence is made constantly made known to us. Each mobile phone conversation is an sign of a significant social nucleus, stretching in all directions, amorphous and protean. We cannot reach out to touch the nucleus, behold it directly, or interrogate it. And yet, it may lie somewhere toward the center of importance -

guiding virtually all the actions - of those who are near.

The new floating worlds differ in another significant respect. Whereas the floating worlds of Tokyo were loosely connected, the new forms of relationship often represent tightly knit micro-communities. The ways in which mobile phone communication enhances and sustains group connection has been the subject of broad commentary. For example, Ling and Yttri (2002) describe the way in which the cell phone enhances "micro-coordination," the capacity of people within the circle to adjust their actions to each other and move together harmoniously as a unit. There is also the use of the phone in what they term, "hyper-coordination,"or the integration of the group in terms of emotional expressions and self-definitions. As Gournay (2002) describes it, the mobile phone moves us toward "fusional" relationships, in which the"the inner circle" is vitally strengthened. As Fortunati (2002) puts it, the mobile phone is "a strong booster of intimacy among those within the sociail network of the user." (p. 51) With continuous communication, those within the circle can develop a high degree of mutual trust and support.

It is also important to note that the new floating worlds are nicely adapted to the demands of life in a highly complex, rapidly moving, high tech society. This is so first because participants can rapidly obtain information from those within the circle as the demands of the day (or night) unfold. One can obtain directions, advice, support, and the confidence of shared opinions and values. Or, if one suddenly learns or recalls information useful to another within the circle, this can rapidly be transmitted. Highly important to many is also the increased degree of safety afforded by the mobile phone. If travelling in an insecure region, concerned about signs of danger, or caught in pressing circumstances (e.g. automobile mishap, air cancellation, unwanted visitor), there are instant companions available. In certain respects the mobile phone functions as a symbolic talisman. Threats of evil are kept at a safe distance.

The style of mobile phone talk is also consistent with its uses in negotiating complexity. Mobile phone conversation is seldom lengthy or labyrinthine. Messages are often brief and to the point. There are few explorations of "deep feelings" or complex ideas; rather, the subject matter is often superficial and easily communicated.[4] Because the participants' attention is often divided between the conversation and the immediate environment, there is less temptation to "go into difficult matters." Here too, participant voices may be raised to a high volume in order to overcome background interference. Simplicity is also demanded by the absence of back-chanelling; highly nuanced phrasing and body language cannot be effectively interpreted. The new floating worlds differ from the characteristics Ong (1982) ascribed to early oral cultures. There are no long stories, or oracular authority. In the mediated oral culture of today one moves toward superficial, sound-bite relationships.

## Floating Worlds and Micro-Fragmentation

If such bonded, informal and transient communities are becoming societal mainstays, how are we to understand the repercussions? What are the political and cultural implications of such movement? In my view, there is no singular set of outcomes resulting from the emergence of the new floating worlds. As with any technology, the mobile phone may be taken up and used by people for purposes never imagined by their founders. However, there are two forms of societal transformation that I find particularly interesting and potentially important, the first concerned with societal relations and the second with the self. With respect to relationships, my interest is in the contribution of mobile phone technology to the micro-segmentation of society. We have long had societal schisms based on class, race, religion, and ethnicity. Gender and sexual preferences have more recently joined the mix. However, there are important ways in which the mobile phone alters the character of social division. In particular it moves the site of inter-group tension from large-scale demographics to micro-social relationships, from schisms in macro-cultural politics to micro-cultural mores.

My argument here is based on the view that any technology enhancing the creation of communities - whether grounded or mobile - also runs the risk of creating conditions of societal conflict. It is within communal interchange that we come to develop both ontologies and ethics. We come to share languages in which certain distinctions are made and not others, and in which value comes to be placed on these distinctions and the actions in which they are embedded. Thus we find enormous cultural differences in world constructions and their associated values, and also within these cultures striking differences among sub-cultures. All such differences set the stage for conflict: my way of life vs. yours. It is thus that any technology contributing to communication within groups has the capacity to increase the shared sense of "we as opposed to them, " and ultimately, "we as better than them." Such a view is presaged by Benedict Anderson's (1983) classic account of the contribution of print technology to the formation of the shared view of "we as nation." As the same language is circulated among people, actions are coordinated around this language, trust is developed, dissenting voices are eliminated, others are identified as "outside" the circle, and those outside are increasingly disparaged, we approach conditions of conflict.

There are subtle ways in which mobile phone technology contributes to micro-social fragmentation. As the small group consumes an increasing proportion of communication time, issues not inherent to group interests lose salience. As small group concerns are intensified, so are demographic divisions pressed to the margins of consciousness. The problems, challenges and possibilities of the micro-structure diminish concerns with broad societal schisms. Micro-social concerns and conflicts become focal.[5] In Gournay's (2002) terms, "We are seeing a desire for closure of the relational network, reduced to a few close friends and the family core." (p 203). Because within group trust may be enhanced, and dependence on the group increased, what happens to those outside the group may be diminished.[6]

Further, mobile phones enable participants in a group to more easily avoid problems

of multiple loyalty. Because most people hold multiple group membership (e.g. family, friendship groups, employment colleagues), any group member can threaten the primacy of "us" when he or she demonstrates an alterior loyalty. ("You mean you would rather be with your friends than your own family?" "Your family life seems to be interfering with your concentration here at work!") However, the mobile phone can effectively create baffles between otherwise competing groups. The user may increase the sense of solidarity, while shielding the fact of multiple loyalties. Because of enhanced mobility, one can communicate solidarity with any group at any time. And if a group is physically present, users can more easily "find a moment alone" to call or send (or receive) a text message to someone outside, vitalizing the outside relationship without threatening the group at hand.[7] As Fortunati (1998) reports, some women in Italy possess several private mobile phones, each devoted to pre-identified correspondents: husband and children, lover, friends. The ability to recognize the caller - either by a digital display or melody - now enhances this capacity maintaining separate lives. Each relationship can function in relative isolation of the others.

## Steps Toward Relational Being

Let us now turn to the implications of mobile phone technology for conceptions of the self. In my view there is an important sense in which the genesis of multiple floating worlds harbors implications for our sense of personal identity. To elaborate, the same process of social interchange by which ontology and ethics are born, also give rise to conceptions of the person. For much of Western culture, the concept of the individual self - the conscious and cognizant agent of action - is more or less accepted as a natural fact. Yet, this concept of the bounded self is also peculiarly Western, and largely a byproduct of cultural developments emerging in the 17th and culminating in the 20th century. It is a view to which philosophers such as Descartes, Locke, and Kant made major contributions, but which was also nurtured by the development of a merchant class, the Reformation, the ultimate development of democracy, and the conception of empirical science.

As I have argued elsewhere (Gergen, 1999), most of the communication technologies of the 20th century functioned to undermine the sense of the bounded self. Film, books, magazines, radio, television, and the internet all foster communication links outside one's immediate social surrounds. They enable one to participate in alterior systems of belief and value, in dialogues with novel and creative outcomes, and in projects that generate new interdependencies. New affective bonds are created outside one's immediate social surrounds. The result is that the centered sense of a bounded self slowly gives way to a "multiphrenia" of partial and conflicted senses of self. Identity becomes fluid, shifting in a chameleon-like way from one social context to another. There is little in the way of "looking inward" to locate "one's true self," because there is little remaining of a core. Indeed, for the newer generations the very idea of a core-self turns strange. Nor are there close companions available for reliable, in-depth explorations of the "inner region of the self." Increasingly we are strung out across the continents, electronically and geographically mobile, and

increasingly over-committed to the numerous relations, projects and desires that accompany the social saturation process. The bounded and centered self is undone.

While I have argued that, in contrast to the effects of the mobile phone, this process is disruptive to close communities, there is at least one important way in which the mobile phone and the technologies of dispersion are similar. Both shift the understanding of self from the bounded to the relational. These ranges of technology emphasize and underscore the importance of connection as opposed to autonomy, looking outward rather than inward, toward network as opposed to self-sufficiency, In this sense, the mobile phone may be more significant than any other technology to date. Certainly technologies that enhance dialogue (e.g. telephone, internet, mobile phone) are more potent in their absorption of the individual into relationship than the monologic technologies of radio or television. However, while the internet is perhaps the queen of dialogic technologies, for the most part it requires a stationary outlet - a geographically stable point where one may "jack in" to the network. Of course, in the near future this requirement may be removed, and the laptop will become a participant in the floating worlds. In the meantime, however, the cell-phone allows geographically unfettered connection 24/7 . In the case of the internet, the individual can roam freely as an autonomous agent whenever he or she is not seated before a computer. With the mobile phone the relational net is always at hand. Within moments a floating relationship can be realized. And, seldom is one without the material symbol of one's relational ties. As a material object, the mobile phone functions as an icon of relationship, of techno-umblicical connection. The Enlightenment paean to individualism, "I think therefore I am" is replaced with "I am linked therefore I am."

I am not suggesting that the transition for the individualist conception to the relational is everywhere in motion. Indeed, many mobile phone users resent the ways in which it interferes with their autonomous activities, and renders their activities more fully accountable (Cooper, 2002).The cell-phone may increase one's security, but it does so at the expense of surveillance. And we must recognize that individualist ideology remains the dominant voice in the West. Nor am I proposing that this transformation to relational vision of the self is altogether dependent upon technologies such as the computer and cell phone. Cultural shifts toward pluralism, multi-culturalism, identity politics, flattened organizations, organizational team building, dialogic pedagogy and the like, all favor an enhanced consciousness of connection over independence. In recent years I have also been very encouraged with the increased scholarly critique of the individualist tradition, and the concerted attempt to develop new and more relational ways of conceptualizing the self.[8] If there is to be a post-Enlightenment transformation that modifies or erases the separation between self and other, it will require multiple efforts, along with the developments of requisite technology.

## Uncertainty and Edgework

My attempt in this offering has been to tease out some of the more subtle but

profound transformations in cultural life accompanying the proliferation of mobile communication. At the outset, I proposed that the mobile phone facilitates a reversal of the communal erosion and diffusion invited by many of the major technologies of the last century. The mobile phone disrupts the centrifugal process of communal decay and offers a counter-tendency, a centripetal movement toward close interdependence. I characterized the new forms of interdependence in terms of floating worlds, resonating with the floating worlds in earlier Japanese times. While similar to the earlier floating worlds in their mobility, their uncontrolability, and their emphasis on social pleasures, they differ in terms of the tight bonds of interdependence facilitated by the mobile phone. As I proposed, these new floating worlds are important politically, inasmuch as they move the center of concern from societal politics to petty bourgeois tensions. At the same time, they function to undermine the traditional ideology of individualism, and to replace it with a view of self-within-relationship.

To be sure, these views must be understood as contributions to a conversation as opposed to definitive observations. Interpretations of cultural life are limited in many ways, not the least of which owing to historical location. This limitation is particularly important in the case of technology, as new technologies are continuously being fed into the matrix of cultural life, and are appropriated in many different ways by different sub-cultures (see, for example, Katz, 1999). In the case of the mobile phone, the problem is acute. Because of the vast popularity of the mobile phone, there is enormous corporate competition for market share. To exceed in this competition, there is a continuous press toward innovation. Thus, the half-life of any particular version of the mobile phone may be brief. New developments are everywhere apparent.

It is also clear that as new generations of the mobile phone emerge, they can significantly alter the picture painted within the present paper. For example, as the industry continues to add such capacities as music channels e-mail and internet facilities, and mobile games, the cell phone will lose much of its ability to empower close-knit relationships. In effect, it will join the ranks of technologies of fragmentation and diffusion. On the other hand, the addition of text messaging, speaker visualization and phone tracking devices may function centripetally to strengthen in-group ties.

In terms of cultural and political futures, the present analysis invites attention to the implications of micro-social fragmentation. I don't wish to argue that the mobile phone will subvert the major conflicts derived from differences in class, race, religion and ethnicity and the like. The mobile phone has been effectively used as an organizing device by right wing and Muslim terrorists in the United States. As Rheingold (2002) advances, it has also been an invaluable asset in organizing street demonstrations, and the emergence of what he calls "smart mobs."[9] In terms of lethal conflict, however, we might welcome the effects of mobile communication in moving the site of conflict from the macro to the micro-level.

The challenge for the future, however, is that of "edgework." How can we soften the boundaries of otherwise competing and conflictual groups within and across societies? There is reason to hope that the technologies responsible for the disruption of local communities may ultimately generate webs of interdependence that will reduce deep loyalties to the micro level group. The scholarly effort to hammer out relational conceptions of the self may successfully expand their vision of the field of relationship. And mobile phone technology may be advanced in a way that a single phone will embody the potential of multiple cell-phones. That is, they will enable the user to sustain multiple group relations with greater ease.

## Footnotes

(1) <u>Herald Tribune</u>, Feb. 24, 2003, pg. 8.
(2) This is to recognize that the social processes facilitated by the mobile phone may not be identical - and indeed could be antithetical - to those favored by laptops, citizen band radio, the walkman, etc.
(3) See also Sommer, R. (2002).
(4) See also Gournay (2002) on the simplicfaction of the formal structure of language when speaking on the mobile phone.
(5) One important reason by-standers resent mobile phone use in their presence is that it identifies the user as "wedded to others." One's isolation from the group of importance is made evident, as one's individual significance is eroded. By the same token, if another gives you their mobile phone number it often functions as an indication of or invitation to bonding.
(6) See also Green (2003) on the influence of mobile communication on trust within communities.
(7) There is also the process called "bombing," in which callers simply use the number of rings to signify their acknowledgement, presence or their affection. "The message" is contained in the number of rings.
(8) See my review in Gergen (1999).
(9) On the positive side, one may argue here that the mobile phone may facilitate the strengthening of the "civil society," that layer of society that mediates between the individual and the State. With strong civil bonds, the power of the State over the people is diminished. Indeed, one may credit the mobile phone with the efficacy of grass-roots movements to resist the American and British governments' call to war against Iraq.

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