

Family ties

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Illustration by Bell Mellor



Kith and kin get closer, with consequences for strangers

IN AUGUST 2006, the wife of an Israeli soldier on duty in the Lebanon war gave birth to a boy. The army granted the father a brief leave, but he had to return to the front before his son's *bris*, the ritual circumcision on the eighth day of his life. So the family did the next best thing. As the *sandak* held the baby and the *mohel* made the cut, a relative filmed the entire event on a mobile phone so that the father on the Lebanese border could watch, live, on his own mobile phone and sing and dance with his comrades.

The tools of nomadism clearly bring families closer by allowing them to stay connected when physically separated. But there are unexpected side effects in many everyday situations, as the following anecdote shows. Richard Ling, a sociologist at Telenor, the largest Norwegian telephone company, and author of "New Tech, New Ties: How Mobile Communication Is Reshaping Social Cohesion", was standing on his porch in Oslo one day, saying farewell to a few guests, when a plumber walked around the corner, talking on his mobile phone to what appeared to be his wife. Mr Ling, who had a leak in the kitchen, was expecting him. But the plumber took Mr Ling and his guests aback by walking right past them and into the house, where he took off his shoes and headed for the kitchen, chattering into his handset all the while.

It was the sort of thing that perhaps excites only sociologists. Here was an example of two big tensions in nomadic society. First, mobile technology pitted the plumber's interaction with a stranger (Mr Ling) against that with his own wife on the phone. The plumber, to use the technical term, had a "weak tie" to Mr Ling but a "strong tie" to his wife which easily prevailed over the weak one, leaving a few Norwegians feeling temporarily awkward and pondering the fate of their society.

Second, the plumber gave precedence to what Mr Ling calls the “mediated” interaction with the person at the other end of the phone, at the expense of his “co-present” communication with Mr Ling who was standing right next to him. In other words, the person who was physically more distant was nonetheless psychologically closer. So out went social norms and rituals (handshakes, greetings) that Norway and other societies accumulated during a past of exclusively co-present interactions. The plumber's only nod to ritual was to take off his shoes.

Sociologists are always arguing about the precise role of ritual in society and the relative importance of the individual, family and community. Emile Durkheim, the earliest, kicked off the debate more than a century ago when he studied Australian aborigines and found that they used rituals to create and maintain solidarity and cohesion among a group. In the 1950s Erving Goffman broadened the definition of rituals to ordinary interactions of daily American life, such as jokes.

In the 1970s Mark Granovetter became one of the most influential sociologists of that decade with a paper titled “The Strength of Weak Ties”. Mr Granovetter argued that society needs not only healthy “strong ties” between relatives and friends but also ample and fluid “weak ties” between casual acquaintances. Far from trivial, these weak ties are the “bridges” between “densely knit clumps of close friends” and thus the conduits for ideas, fads and trends. “Social systems lacking in weak ties will be fragmented and incoherent,” Mr Granovetter argued. Any erosion of weak ties is therefore to be deplored.

The more dismal science

In the 1990s, as the internet came into widespread use, sociologists, never an upbeat bunch to begin with, became decidedly pessimistic. Some observed a “loss of social capital” as people spent their time transfixed by screens rather than other people. Others saw the (real-world, as opposed to online) social networks of Americans shrinking, with ever more people feeling that they were intimate with nobody at all. Robert Kraut at Carnegie Mellon University argued that the internet causes social isolation and depression. Norman Nie at Stanford University believed that “internet use at home has a strong negative impact on time spent with friends and family as well as time spent on social activities.”

But most of these observations, made in a rich country at the height of the PC era, focused on the wired and stationary kind of communications technology rather than the wireless and mobile sort. Now, as mobile communications are becoming the norm, a new generation of sociologists is scrambling to update all these theories. So far, most of them agree that nomadic technology, far from isolating people, brings them closer to their families, friends and lovers—their strong ties. But they still disagree on what that means for weak ties with strangers, and thus society at large.

Illustration by Bell Mellor



Nomadic technology deepens family ties because, as another sociologist, Christian Licoppe, puts it, it enables “connected presence”, which is new in history. In the era of stationary communications technology, people used landline phones that belonged to a place rather than a person. In that

communication culture people talked infrequently and viewed a conversation as an occasion. Typically, they would plan the call for an appropriate time, such as a Sunday. Both sides would introduce themselves with a greeting—ie, a ritual—and then take time to catch up.

With mobile phones, on the other hand, people call, text or e-mail one another constantly throughout the day. Since they are always, in effect, contacting a person rather than a place, and since the receiver can see the caller's name, and probably his picture, they often dispense with greetings altogether. The exchanges now tend to be frequent and short. People expect less content but instead a feeling of permanent connection, as though they were in fact together during the entire time between their physical meetings.

Mr Ling, using data from Norway, has found that about half of all mobile-phone calls and text messages go to the same three or four people, typically within ten kilometres of the caller. A lot of this is what he calls "micro-co-ordination", as family members are out about town and check in with each other to plan their next stop or errand. Dad might call from the supermarket's dairy aisle to find out which brand of yogurt to buy; mum might text that she is running late and that dad needs to pick up the kids.

But such communications go far beyond the merely utilitarian. Manuel Castells, the sociologist at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication, says that mobile technology affects children the most. On one hand, adolescents today become socially autonomous earlier than their parents did, "building their own communities from the bottom up" through constant text-messaging and photo-sharing among their clique, even if this circumvents the wishes of their parents. On the other hand, they also have their parents on speed-dial, and are only one button away from help if they get into trouble. Mr Castells calls this a "safe autonomy pattern".

This has some sociologists concerned. James Katz at Rutgers calls the mobile phone a new sort of umbilical cord between children and their parents and wonders whether this might in some cases "retard maturation". Sherry Turkle, the psychologist at MIT, says that wireless gadgets are, ironically, a "tethering technology" and create new dependencies that delay the important "Huck Finn moment" in young lives when adolescents first realise that they are alone on the urban equivalent of the Mississippi. Getting drunk and lost after a party is different when one push of a button summons the parental chauffeur. In 2005 a psychology professor at Middlebury College in Vermont found that undergraduates were communicating with their parents, on average, more than ten times a week.

Love in cyberspace

Mobile technology also tethers couples, especially young ones, but in a different way. Mimi Ito, an anthropologist who studies the effects of mobile technology on youth culture in Japan and America, has found that Japanese lovers send constant text messages to avoid parental rules and to stay connected emotionally when they are physically separated. Every nomadic culture has its idiosyncrasies, and the Japanese speciality is a rich vocabulary of "emoticons": "I really want to see you (>_<)"; "I feel like I am going to be sick (;_;)".

This steady stream of emoticons and photos in between physical "flesh meets" amounts to "tele-nesting", says Ms Ito. It also spices up and prolongs the flesh meets. Young people in Tokyo, she has observed, will start their date by exchanging text messages all afternoon as they do homework or take the train to the rendezvous. At night, on their journey home after the actual date, they use messages again as "fading embers of conversation", sometimes continuing for days and turning little memories into the couple's "lore".

Often entire cliques do this sort of thing, creating, in effect, their own tribal medium and narrative. Ms Ito has noticed a new genre of photography on the rise as young people use their phones to snap photos of everyday situations—the view from the escalator on the way to school, say—which mean a lot to their friends and nothing to anybody else. They especially love photos that capture "dumb things that their friends do", such as getting drunk and falling into puddles, which collectively amount to "everyday, casual documentaries" for a circle of friends.

Out with the out crowd

The potential problem with connected presence is that it usually excludes other people who may be physically present. In situations that might once have been an opportunity to talk to a stranger—waiting for a bus or boarding an aeroplane, say—people now fill the time with a few messages to parents, lovers or friends. This strengthens the strong ties, but weakens, or even cuts, the weak ties in society. In some cases, says Mr Ling, it leads to “bounded solidarity”, when cliques become so turned in on themselves that they all but stop interacting with the wider society around them.

The first casualty is usually etiquette. Noise pollution is only one kind of violation. In an American survey conducted in 2005, 62% of the people polled—and 74% of those over 60—felt that “using a cell phone in public is a major irritation for other people,” but only 32% of those between 18 and 27 shared that opinion. That divergence makes for a combustible social cocktail whenever the generations mix. It is routine nowadays for people to answer calls in cinemas, restaurants and public toilets, even at weddings and funerals. The volume of these transgressions varies with the culture—Americans and Italians, say, are louder than Swedes or Japanese. And some societies are beginning to adjust. Some countries now have “quiet cars” on trains where patrons cannot talk on their mobiles but must text instead.

Trickier etiquette problems arise when the issue is not so much noise as context. One example that will enter the history books occurred last September when Rudy Giuliani, a former mayor of New York, was still waging a vigorous campaign for the presidency. As he was up on his podium and in mid-sentence addressing the National Rifle Association (NRA), a crucial constituency for a Republican candidate, his mobile rang and, to gasps in the huge audience, he decided to answer it. What followed, captured on microphone, is worth repeating in its banality: “Hello, dear. I’m talking, I’m talking to the members of the NRA right now. Would you like to say hello? I love you, and I’ll give you a call as soon as I’m finished. OK? OK, have a safe trip. Bye-bye. Talk to you later, dear. I love you.” When he hung up, the audience had turned to stone.

Usually the situation is subtler and the incongruence has more to do with attention. This can be true even during silent mobile communications. It is now routine for university students to text, e-mail and instant-message during lectures. Mr Ling, whose job includes loitering in public places for observation, watched a woman at an Oslo underground station who texted as she walked. She was wholly focused on her text message but had to look up occasionally to weave through the crowds on the platform. Other people were doing the same. It was an “atomised and individualised” scene, says Mr Ling: a new form of the proverbial lonely crowd.

But at least this particular Norwegian woman was signalling through her body language to all around her that she wanted to be left alone. The spread of “hands-free” Bluetooth devices, with hidden earplugs seemingly attached to nothing, is removing even those clues. Steve Love, a psychologist, was travelling on a train from Edinburgh to Glasgow once when a girl standing next to him started talking to him. She asked him how he was and how his day had been, and Mr Love, though a bit shy, politely told her how much he was looking forward to watching Scotland play football that evening. As he spoke, the girl looked at him in horror, then turned away. Only then did Mr Love hear her say “OK, I’ll call you later.” Not a word or gesture was exchanged for the remainder of the (suddenly uncomfortable) journey.

Probably the single most common etiquette conflict occurs, as Mr Ling puts it, when mediated communication interrupts co-present communication, as when two or more people are sitting at a table in conversation or negotiation and one of them gets, and answers, a call. The other co-present people must now keep themselves busy while seeming nonchalant. What is more, they must pretend not to be eavesdropping even though they are only a few feet away from the mediated conversation, ideally by assuming a pose of concentration on some other object, such as their fingernails or their own phone. As soon as the intervening call ends, everybody must try to re-enter the co-present context as gracefully as possible.

Illustration by Bell Mellor



So there is evidence that nomadism is good for in-groups, but at the expense of strangers. If that is true, Mr Granovetter would consider it bad for society. Fortunately, however, the last chapter has not yet been written. Since the outburst of pessimism about the internet among sociologists in the 1990s, the web has recently become an intensely social medium, thanks in large part to proliferating online social networks such as Facebook and MySpace. Young people have been using these websites on their PCs to keep in touch with much larger groups of people than has ever been feasible before. It is not uncommon for adolescents to add several "friends" a day to their "social graph" on Facebook or to the "buddy list" of their instant-messaging service.

As mobile devices now become, in effect, computers for accessing the wider web, these online services are also moving from stationary to mobile use. Whether that could reinvigorate the weak ties in society along with the strong ties remains to be seen. But etiquette, both online and offline, remains a work in progress.