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Synchronous Asynchronicity: The Use of Mobiles to Pattern Face-to-Face Encounters in Chaotic Environments

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The use of mobiles to pattern face-to-face encounters in chaotic environments

Jason Noble and Lelia Green

ABSTRACT: Although mobile media are commonly associated with distant communications, young adults also use Short Message Service (SMS) texting for inter-group exchanges in co-located circumstances. Such co-located mobile phone use is particularly evident where usual communication cues are compromised by a chaotic environment. Chaos can ensue when cues of voice and vision are impaired, with secondary impacts upon clear thought and fixed points of reference. A dark, noisy club environment would provide one example of this dynamic at work. Chaotic surroundings can encourage a pleasing suspension of individual control, while exposing participants to a range of social and emotional risks. Text communication offers the security of connecting with co-located companions in such circumstances. Mobile phone use mediates the chaos and introduces the possibility of synchronous activity. Accepting the argument that texting is a form of asynchronous communication, this paper suggests its commonplace co-located use to synchronise activity in chaotic situations.

Introduction

Young adults in many contemporary cultures use mobile phones to provide connection at a distance, for example, via voice calls and SMS texting while an individual is in transit (Larsen, Urry, & Axhausen, 2006, p. 111). Most research has this focus, with the exception of a few studies of Swedish and Finnish teenagers (Weilenmann & Larsson, 2002; Kasesniemi & Rautiainen, 2002) that found that the mobile could be used as a collaborative communications device with which to capture and share the

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moment. To date, there has been little academic attention paid to young people's co-located and co-present use of mobile phones to communicate in chaotic, sensory-deprived situations. Such environments are overwhelmingly associated with youth culture and include large gatherings as a component of parties, pubs, clubs, bars, raves, and music festivals. Chaos may be exacerbated by the physical characteristics of the environment: noise may be high and/or light levels may be low, while the range of vision is likely to be reduced as a result of the crowded social setting. Additionally, the capacity of young adults to process information may be impaired by alcohol and other drugs. Ethnographic research in chaotic environments suggests that people are using SMS texting to connect with co-located others and to synchronise face-to-face encounters.

Research methodology

Fifty young adults (25 male, 25 female) aged between 18 and 30 were recruited and interviewed. Respondent selection specifically targeted individuals whose lifestyles 'reinvent adolescence' as a 'prolonged stage of development' (Rice, 1992, p. 50). The interviews were one-on-one, semi-structured, and lasted for approximately one hour each. By adopting a semi-structured interview approach, we were able to address major themes that provided an opportunity for interviewees to discuss areas of personal relevance to them in greater detail (Green, 1999). Respondents' names have not been used and pseudonyms have been assigned to maintain confidentiality. Field notes constituted the second component of the data gathering. These were based on participant observation in target social and leisure settings such as parties, pubs, clubs, bars, raves, and music festivals. Records were made of the use of mobiles for synchronous and asynchronous communication. The hypothesis is that phones are used in co-located circumstances to coordinate face-to-face encounters in chaotic environments to enhance the individual and collective experiencing of leisure and entertainment events.

The theoretical perspectives employed in this research are new media studies and consumption studies. New media work is implicated in the analysis of mobile phone use in an everyday context. Consumption studies is involved in the consuming of mobile phone applications (such as SMS texting) and in the consumption of music, leisure, and entertainment locales. Both of these perspectives are transdisciplinary, grounded in older notions of audience studies and consumer behaviour, as well as borrowing from sociology, psychology, anthropology, and a

range of other perspectives. Cooper, Green, Murtagh, and Harper argue that 'the proliferation of certain practices, text messaging being the obvious example, should be thought of as constituting new forms of association or community, forms that might be contrasted with face-to-face social interaction' (2002, p. 288). Such new forms of association are investigated here.

Within this paper, the term 'co-located' is used to indicate that potential communicants are physically present within a specific locale. 'Co-presence', or face-to-face, occurs when the parties are in close contact with each other. Even though individuals are co-located, they may not be able to see each other: it might be too dark, the space might be too crowded, they may have become separated. The notion of co-location indicates that, even if phone users are not actually in each other's company at any particular moment, it would take only minutes to unite them were it not for the chaos of the environment. 'Chaos' refers to circumstances where unpredictable and unplanned events spiral to create increasingly complex situations. Examples are innumerable, but might include, for example, a person becoming lost at a music festival while looking for a drinks vendor and then arriving back at the starting point to discover that their friends have left a message to say that a favourite artist has been sighted in the drinks tent and to join them there, when there are four drinks tents and the specific tent has not been specified. 'Sensory deficiency' is used to describe a temporary incapacity where one or more senses is compromised or overwhelmed by specific environmental factors in the environment. Thus noise levels in many music venues mean that mobile voice calls are impossible and ring tones are inaudible. A vibrating phone may be virtually undetectable because the vibration is drowned by bass lines in the music. Darkness and crowds may impact upon visual faculties, making it hard to locate a friend, even if they are standing comparatively close. Backlit mobile SMS texting offers specific communication benefits in dark, noisy, and crowded environments. Also, the potential social and emotional benefits of moving from co-location to face-to-face co-presence mean that people have strong incentives to communicate effectively in chaotic settings.

Experiencing co-present entertainment

The research reported here builds upon Noble's (2008) findings concerning the Amplifier Bar, a specific night-time venue in Perth, Australia. Noble argues that phone use in the Amplifier Bar connected co-located regulars to create a communicative network that offered safety,

sociability, and sanctuary for individuals and their collectivities in the spatial navigation of this chaotic entertainment venue. Usage patterns and rationales provided by respondents illustrate the importance of the locale when investigating mobile communications and social networks. Noble's study demonstrated how the mobile provides a useful starting point for investigating the consumption of leisure time and space, particularly in relation to the coordinating of intermittent face-to-face meetings. Larsen, Urry, and Axhausen argue that face-to-face meetings are 'central to [people's] social lives and to the building and maintenance of their social capital, and of social capital more widely' (2006, p. 125). Accordingly, it can be very important to share an event or experience with another person in a timely manner so as to maximise its value. The mobile is often critical to achieving this aim. Judy (27) explained that she prefers experiencing entertainment and leisure locales as part of a group. 'Emotionally and physically, in regards to my location, I have been affected because if it [a face-to-face meeting] hasn't happened then I almost feel sad because I don't have my group of friends. So I'm relying on my mobile phone to get me a group of friends [to share the experience].'

For some people, as Larsen et al. (2006) indicate, a shared experience is an experience that builds social capital, and this makes meeting up with others a high priority. Connecting up in chaotic environments, however, can be problematic. As Ling has noted, one advantage of mobile communication is that it allows 'an interactive process whereby the needs and situations of the partners [parties] can be progressively accommodated' (2004, p. 76). This removes some anxiety associated with arriving at the venue at different times, looking for a vantage point to set up base, buying food and drink, using the bathrooms, and so on. All of these events might potentially fragment a group that can then be reassembled using mobiles. What has not been noted to date are the advantages of texting in chaotic circumstances where a mobile's backlit screen provides useful illumination in a dark setting and where the noise levels make voice calls impossible.

For Australia's annual Big Day Out touring festival, Cummings found that 'For festival-goers the spatial layout and timetabling of the festival are very important in creating ... atmosphere. Indeed, if the festival site is perceived as overcrowded or too hectic then festival-goers feel overwhelmed' (2005, p. 5). Mobile connectivity provides a first line of defence against feeling overwhelmed. Although there are relatively fixed temporal and spatial parameters to a festival, each festival event is filled with chaotic experiences. Acts run late. Friends become

separated. Queues expand exponentially. Patrons are affected by heat, noise, exhaustion, alcohol, and other drugs. The flexibility provided by mobiles in scheduling and re-scheduling face-to-face encounters, and the physical and psychological relationship that individuals have with their phones, offer users a sense of familiarity, connection, and reassurance. For each individual, their mobile creates a local and familiar point of engagement with the large-scale experience, making it less overwhelming and thus more enjoyable. This control allows the mobile user a sense of orchestrating their social experience. Monique (26) highlights the social aspect of consuming a music festival:

Before I would have in my mind under which bands at which times and pretty much go there and that's my routine, and that's what I'm there for. But these days, you rock up and your friends let you know what's good so you run over there and you might be watching a band and you get a message [that another band is on at same time]. It's more a social, spontaneous day ... From what I imagine and see, people focus less on the music and what you actually paid the ticket for and more on the social.

Cummings's view is that it is 'the intensity of the experience of attending a festival and the "atmosphere" that give festivalgoers a sense of connectedness and belonging' (2005, p. 4). As Judy's and Monique's quotes indicate, some participants choose to share these experiences with existing friends rather than with strangers. Phone texts help augment the experience via real-time information updates concerning how—and with whom—to consume entertainment at a music festival.

Chesher addresses one version of a 'mobile mediated event' through his analysis of the 2006 U2 concert held in Sydney, Australia. He constructs the presence of mobile phones at the concert as if they were of transformative importance, as if new possibilities were opened up:

Alongside 70,000 people who came to each performance, tens of thousands of mobile phones also attended. Seeing so many phones participating in such an event led me to ask: what connections could be made between the world's most popular band and the world's most popular portable electronic device? How did thousands of individuated connections mediated by mobile phones transform a 'mass' spectacle? (2007, p. 217)

This speculation concerning the mobile phones was not incidental: the technology was to be central to the spectacle. 'Towards the end of the show ... lead singer Bono incited the audience to make quite a different use of their mobile phones—to turn them on, hold them up, and "set the stadium alight"' (Chesher, 2007, p. 223). Subsequently, the fans created their own 'Milky Way' by waving their lit-screen phones in the darkened stadium. Although this was just one of the ways in which U2 solicited mass use of the technology—creating order from possible chaos—Chesher pays little attention to individuals' uses of the phone to create synchronous connections.

Compared with the orchestrated activities of the U2 concert, many dance venues constitute chaotic environments. Typically, differing sources of extremely loud music are delivered via speakers in multiple (but separate) entertainment spaces. The choice of music associated with each space, and the choices of spaces within the locale, mean that 'individuals move between different dance floors and engage with different crowds' (Bennett, 2006, p. 110). This fragmentation of the acousto-spatial environment disperses patrons differentially, while at the same time satisfying individual music tastes. Paradoxically, dancing to one's favourite music can unite patrons in the moment through what Filmer argues is a collective 'loss of self', which he suggests 'comes to the foreground in such well-known social practices as ... dancing together' as a result of 'the mutual tuning in relationship' (2003, p. 96). As the moment passes, however, the urge to reconnect with an original group of friends can become pressing.

Cognitive challenges of sensory deficiency

Judy admits to checking her phone more regularly at music venues than in other settings. She attributes this behaviour both to constant real-time updates from friends coordinating face-to-face meetings, and to her attempts to stay in touch with several individuals. 'I don't put it away', says Judy, 'I'll hold onto it and walk. ... If I'm walking and I want to get [somewhere] in a hurry, (a) it's not constricting my walking but (b) I can also keep it safe in regards to if anything happens, bang, it's just there'.

A literal on-hand connection between an individual and their mobile is sometimes a strategy to counteract the fear of losing the phone. Such a crisis might also mean losing touch with friends, and even the prospect of this can induce anxiety. Holding the phone in her palm, Judy avoids having to remove the mobile from her clothes pockets or handbag, use it, and replace it. She is less likely to miss a call, even when she

cannot hear its ring tone. Such a hand-held practice also offers Judy the potential for 'thinking on the thumbs' while in transit and staying virtually connected while potentially alone in the crowd.

If a mobile text comes through, the dynamics tying the user into their environment have to change immediately. Alicia (21) commented on the impact upon a person's physical mobility of receiving a text: 'You really want to concentrate on what you are doing or where you are if you're seeing a band or if you're dancing or whatever. But, you really do have to stop yourself and almost stand still ... You are focusing on this screen to make sure you are reading it properly'. The requirement for an individual to refocus their attention when they receive a text and to interface with their mobile phone screen demonstrates a fragmentation of the present that can be just as intrusive as taking a voice call. However, the cognitive demands of texting—along with the intense focus on the small screen—can impede someone's physical mobility in a way that a voice call does not. High decibel noise and reverberation further complicate the use of mobiles to negotiate an entertainment venue. Alicia discusses the problem of false positive cues:

You're at a music event and the [bass] vibrations are obviously always present ... It's distracting because you always think your phone's going off [incoming texts/calls] ... And it's nothing. Or you won't feel anything and find out [later] you've got five missed calls because it's mixing up with the sound. Sometimes the senses are saying "There's something there, there's something there", and other times depending on the sound and everything and where you are ... it works in the opposite way'.

Alicia's experiences demonstrate the potential for sensory confusion when an environmental factor, such as bass reverberation from live or recorded music, can be mistaken for the vibrating function of an incoming text/call. Background noise may result in an individual checking their phone on a more regular basis due to being unsure whether it was their phone vibrating or another bass surge.

Steve (30) tries to keep his phone in sight when he is socialising at a nightclub called Ambar in Perth: 'You know with my phone, it has the blue light on it, you'll always see that. And if you are trying to organise something in the club, but you still want to have your dance and your drink, quite often I will just have it in my hand so I can mainly

see the light on my phone, especially in big, bassy places'. Here Steve recognises that bass vibrations are a problem in noisy environments that also counteract the effectiveness of the ring tone. Light emitted from a mobile handset may be the only cue for an incoming text, hence the need that some respondents feel to keep the phone constantly in peripheral vision. Conversely, Steve's habit of dancing with his blue-light phone means that his friendship circle is more likely to recognise and identify him. These strategies of cuing attention to the sensory prompt least affected by the leisure locale demonstrate the importance of a range of communication cues in noisy, dark, and/or crowded social settings.

Real-time information updates

One of my mates got with one of my mate's ex-girlfriends [on the dance floor], which we don't really approve of because it's quite a close ex-girlfriend. Yeah, we got the [text photo] message from Zak who was obviously dancing around them. [The text was sent] to me and my mate, but not the ex-boyfriend [who was at the bar]. They texted to ... let us know that pretty much ... 'See this!' [what was happening on the dance floor]. It was more of an informative text message to make sure we didn't drag his [the ex-boyfriend's] arse over there while these two were getting it on. (Steve, 30)

The critical event Steve discusses took place at The Deen (Hotel) in Northbridge, Perth, and involved the role of texting in mediating actions between two co-located groups. One was at the bar, and one was on the dance floor. There were approximately 10 metres between the groups and the venue was dark, noisy, and crowded. The 'thinking on the thumbs' by Zak on the dance floor in sending the text in real time to two of the group members at the bar averted a potentially explosive situation in the venue. Importantly, the social value of this information lay in its being sent to two individuals and not the remaining member of the group: the ex-boyfriend. This enabled the ex-boyfriend to be removed from the area by his friends to avoid the possibility of a hostile confrontation on the dance floor.

Townsend argues that mobile communications are 'dramatically speeding [up] the metabolism of urban systems ... The real-time city, in which system conditions can be monitored and reacted to instantaneously, has arrived' (2002, p. 66). Applying this concept to the dynamics of human interaction, texting is increasingly facilitating

new forms of social exchange and coordination, often at high speed. Texting a message can result in a very different exchange from one that might have occurred in an alternative setting using face-to-face communication. A message sent face-to-face is an almost instantaneous transmission. Further, given that face-to-face interactions send and receive the greatest 'bandwidth' of non-verbal cues in an ongoing synchronous exchange, the opportunities for 'overhearing' in crowded environments can mean that it is difficult to exclude specific people from the conversation. Even if others cannot hear spoken words, they can pick up information from gestures and expressions. One paradox of texting as non-spoken asynchronous application (Ling, 2004, p. 151) is that, while it offers minimal cues, this screen-based communication can afford almost synchronous exchanges between people who are alert to incoming texts and co-located in chaotic environments. Indeed, this asynchronous communication channel can be used to synchronise real-time action more effectively than face-to-face in such circumstances. However, had the mobile screen been read over Steve's or his friend's shoulder by the ex-boyfriend, then the result might have been just as damaging in terms of what he could have experienced visually, face-to-face, but with the added issue of possibly seeming like gossip.

Conclusion

Young adult phone users consuming chaotic entertainment venues are often highly mobile: physically, experientially, and virtually. Their mediated physical mobility allows them to respond to changing circumstances and opportunities. Making the most of such circumstances may involve having one eye on the screen, and the other on the crowd. Increasingly, face-to-face interactions are blurring with the mediated consumption of mobile phones and texting as a co-present or co-located dynamic. Real-time information updates using text messaging are facilitating new forms of social interaction and coordination. In particular, the potential of texting for the dissemination of time-sensitive information is increasingly being realised as a social tool, especially in environments where sensory information is compromised.

The limited communication repertoires available in environments that combine aural and visual sensory deficiencies create complex social situations that privilege texting traffic as an asynchronous application that facilitates synchronicity—especially with regard to arranging face-to-face meetings. In conclusion, it is one thing to be co-located at a chaotic event: it is another to meet up face-to-face—or to avoid

meeting up face-to-face—and texting can help with this.

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