

# Digital Cultures

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**For Tomas**

mobile device but it is also used in a number of other settings: at home, in the car (it can be fitted into car stereos), and at work. It can be plugged into other machines with ease while its capacity, as well as its randomizing and programmable functions, make it ideal to play anywhere. At home, for example, it offers more flexibility than a CD in terms of programming one's entire collection into a coherent sequence of songs that one is in the mood for. In this sense, its status as a kind of personalized mobile jukebox is suited to customized listening within a variety of contexts. If the Walkman was a gadget that blurred the divisions between the private and the public, it was nevertheless only used in public settings in order to render them more personal. The iPod, however, is a device that can be used in both personal and public settings in order to enhance the individual's audio experience.

While Apple has certainly been dominant in the DAP and PMP markets, it is by no means guaranteed that this will always be the case. Sony and Creative, in particular, are attempting to compete in the market. Apple's success, meanwhile, is not always met with consumer satisfaction and the gap between hype and reality has led to many complaints about faulty iPods. Retail analysts Olswang have reported that 'iPod owners are twice as likely to have had to ask for a repair to their player, than owners of other brands' (Inman 2006: 6). Nevertheless, such complaints have yet to dent Apple's market dominance; the likelihood of Windows – whose Zune player was launched in the USA in November 2006 – doing so in the near future is remote. (Currently, the product had yet to be released outside the USA, which will surely dent its chances of success.)

The Zune has a relatively large screen, which makes it ideal for watching moving images on the go. Entering the PMP market at such a late stage, Microsoft is obviously gambling on the growth of portable moving image viewing. Currently, there does not seem to be the same demand for video on the move as there does music, though the future direction of PMPs is moving towards multi-functionality (and, hence, many iPods now contain video, as well as audio functions). Mobile phones have long offered multi-functionality and the fact that many people use such devices to listen to music on has forced Apple to respond. In reply, they have launched the 'iPhone', which is a telephone, PMP, Internet device and camera, among other things. The iPhone, a characteristically sleek Apple gadget, also includes a state-of-the-art multi-touch sensing screen, which is scratch-resistant and tailored for ease of use with one's fingertips. (Apple subsequently launched the 'iPod touch', which added the multi-touch sensitive screen and wi-fi networking capabilities to the iPod.) Launched in the USA in June 2007 and in the UK, Germany and France in November 2007, currently, the device was in its early stages of market penetration. Inevitably, the hype underpinning its launch was so forceful that it was sometimes difficult to distinguish between advertising and reporting in relation to the product. Nevertheless, early reports and sales were generally positive, if not unanimously so. Whether the iPhone marks the stage where the DAP and PMP become significant, yet short-lived media phenomena, or whether it fails to penetrate the market in the same manner as its music-focused progenitor, remains to be seen. At which point the fog of hype currently obscuring attempts to assess the product rationally will have shifted onto a number of more modern lifestyle gadgets.

## Participatory culture: mobility, interactivity and identity

Matt Hills

Digital culture has undoubtedly already impacted in a variety of ways on contemporary life, but one of the increasingly significant developments it has ushered in relates to mediated communication 'on the move'. Of course, as with many so-called New Media developments, this is not something wholly new; 'old media' such as analogue radio has been handily portable for decades, and the Walkman personal stereo became a massively popular analogue device, in the 1980s, for privately listening to recorded cassette tapes in public space (see Chapter 6). Despite these sorts of precursor, it can nevertheless be argued that digital, mobile media does indeed offer a series of distinctively portable possibilities.

First and foremost is the fact that 'computer-mediated communication' (CMC), can now be utilized in ever-more mobile forms. Emails can be accessed and read while users of BlackBerries or similar devices are out and about, and wireless or 'wi-fi' broadband coverage is becoming increasingly commonplace, at least in urban areas of high population density in the Western world. Computers, telephones, photographic media, even television and video: the long-held concept of 'media convergence' is finally beginning to see fruition within consumer culture, and it is in the arena of mobile media where the interfaces and intersections of different media technologies are perhaps most visible. However, as Henry Jenkins has pointed out, convergence is not merely the bundling together, in one device or delivery mechanism, of different strands of media type of content:

Convergence does not depend on any specific delivery mechanism. Rather, convergence represents a paradigm shift – a move from medium-specific content to content that flows across multiple media channels, toward the increased interdependence of communications systems, toward multiple ways of accessing media content, and toward ever more complex relations between top-down corporate media and bottom-up participatory culture.

(Jenkins 2006a: 243)

Convergence, in this sense, is more about 'multi-platforming', where media texts and audiences perhaps start to move almost seamlessly across different platforms such as television, online on-demand radio, podcasts, user-generated content, digital video, and so on. One of the especially intriguing things with 'nomadic' or 'mobile' communications is that the very concept itself has therefore become

some that amorphous. Given that some information and communication technology (ICT) users and consumers may be accessing the same services (the web, even television and radio) via mobile, wireless devices, while others may be accessing these through (in practice) fixed-point desktop terminals in the home or workplace, or even old-fashioned television sets dealing with digital television signals, then how can we start to delimit the range and scope of 'mobile' media? Is blogging, for example, something done sitting at a desk, or something done *in situ*, perhaps out on the street, standing in a doorway with a lightweight notebook and a borrowed wireless network? (see Gillmor 2006).

## Nomadic communication

Dealing with something like the mobile phone may seem the clearest option, but I would argue that it is the fuzzy edges of 'mobile' media, where networks and services previously thought of as 'static' are now becoming increasingly accessible on the move, where we can learn more about the possibilities of 'nomadic' communications in digital culture. Furthermore, 'mobile' media are not always something distinct from 'fixed-point' digital media; increasingly, mobile digital devices – mobile phones, camera phones, iPods and the like – have been techno-culturally defined as symbiotic with consumer 'hub' personal computers (PCs) or laptops through which digital content libraries are archived/backed-up, and through which images and captured video are uploaded to the web to be shared via social networking sites. Again, there are very fuzzy edges around the 'mobile' or the 'nomadic' here, as many of these technologies call for, or incite, the 'bringing home' of ported, portable digital data to a central – possibly fixed – PC, conceptualized as the 'storage' space or archive for files. As such, mobile digital media needs to be seen as defined in interaction and interrelationship with less self-evidently portable ICTs.

How, then, have digital communications devices begun to shift our experiences and uses of the media towards the nomadic? Here, I introduce three significant changes:

- 1 the move away from conceptualizing 'mobile' media as something belonging to 'public' rather than 'private' space ('nomadic' communications may now find their mobility within domestic space rather than outside it, or in opposition to 'home' territories);
- 2 the volume of media 'content' that mobile devices such as MP3 or MP4 players can now routinely handle on demand, and outcomes related to this factor;
- 3 the possibilities for self-expression and articulations of self-identity offered by 'nomadic' digital media.

(Marshall 2004)

In short, these three areas of interest could be summed up as interrogating the 'where', the 'what' and the 'who' of digital mobile media. Along with, and threaded

through, thinking about these issues, I also want to flag up some of the critiques that have been made of emergent mobile digital cultures. These concerns relate partly to the 'always-on' nature of specific devices and networks (Middleton 2007) – that is that lines between 'work' and 'private life' may be eroded – and partly to the use of digital communications technology in controversial youth-cultural practices such as the posting online of 'happy slapping' videos (Nightingale 2007). As with many previous 'new' media, mobile digital devices (e.g. camera phones) have been partly interpreted as challenging old systems of power and regulation, hence allowing youth subcultures to engage in activities thought of as threatening to the social order. Though it may not be in any way possible to construct a 'balance sheet' of cultural developments, pros and con, in this area, it does remain important not to fall into premature cultural celebration or condemnation. Digital culture is never simply 'one thing' which can be monolithically assessed as a 'good' or 'bad' series of practices, and it is also fast-moving and flexible. For example, there is a fair chance that by the time this discussion sees print, it may already have been partly superseded by further media technological developments. Perhaps digital culture extends 'planned obsolescence' and the notion of constant 'upgrading' into habitual patterns of consumption and self-conceptualization, even in the world of academic commentary.

## The where, what and who of digital mobile communications

Rather more traditionally, 'mobile' media have been thought of in a specific way as devices which offer mobility *outside the home*, rather than forming part of a domestic media set-up. Indeed, in this sense, 'mobile' media can be said to be about taking a sense of the home(ly) out into the cultural world. This meaning is emphasized in Raymond Williams's infamous account:

I can't find an ordinary term for it, which is why I have to call it one of the ugliest phrases I know: 'mobile privatisation'. It is private. It involves a good deal of evident consumption. Much of it centred on the home itself. The dwelling place. At the same time it is not a retreating privatisation, of a deprived kind, because what it especially confers is an unexampled mobility ... It is a shell you can take with you.

(Williams 1977: 171 cited in Bull 2000: 179)

The 'shell ... you take with you' is 'centred on the home' but it is not inevitably in the home; it takes the familiar, or a seemingly protective layer of it, out into unfamiliar public space. This is one of the main arguments in Michael Bull's excellent study of personal stereo usage, that *Walkmans* – and latterly iPods, we might hazard – enable users to 'mediate the "other"' in terms of their own narcissistically oriented intention (see Chapter 6). The description of this experience might be described as 'culturally solipsistic travelling' (Bull 2000: 181). Like Williams's 'mobile privatization', this is a depiction of a culture of blocking-out, with the screening-out or sounding-out of urban space and its others amounting very nearly to 'a state of

cultural autism' (Bull 2000: 181) for its headphone- or earphone-wearing consumers. By taking familiar audiovisual content with them, users can arguably retreat, within public spaces, into their own (semi-)private realms of familiar media consumption. Multi-modal, multimedia consumption is, in this style of account, freed from its more usual domestic terrain: 'Internet-enriched media consumption is no longer fixed in a domestic environment, ... media suffuse and permeate daily life and many of us are increasingly "multi-taskers"' (Talbot 2007: 172).

However, this extension of 'the private' into public space has not always been viewed negatively, with David Jennings instead suggesting that although (2007); (see also Jenkins 2002 and 2006a: 244–5; Lévy 1997):

The increasing ubiquity of portable devices that absorb people's attention in public spaces may create the impression of a population retreating into cocoons ... with the spread of inexpensive wireless networks, these devices are sprouting more social features that encourage sharing and communicating between people, bringing them together rather than keeping them apart.

(Jennings 2007: 179–80)

Regardless of positive or negative commentary, what these scholarly accounts share is the basic assumption that nomadic communications are centred around types of 'mobile privatization', whether this is a 'screening-out' of the unfamiliar, or an extension of contact with one's pre-existent social networks. The 'private' is thereby carried out, or along with, the 'public' self. What interests me in this context is the possibility that so-called 'nomadic' digital communications may actually now have moved beyond 'mobile privatization' and into its reverse; 'private mobilization', if you like, whereby 'public' spaces are brought – with wireless network mobility – into the home. In other words, rather than 'home' constituting a fixed point or 'base' that is bounded and set apart from the cultural world, domestic spaces enabled with wi-fi broadband are now increasingly not just pervaded by multiple media flows and multiple social networks; they are also targeted as consumer spaces for a range of wireless technologies. 'Mobile' technology is hence arguably just as present within the home as it is outside it. And here, 'mobility' or 'nomadism' may be about being able to move from room to room with a wi-fi networked laptop or music player, as well as different occupants of the domestic space having their mobile phones to hand.

The assumption that 'mobile communication = mobility in public space' is thus only part of the story here. Mobility can also mean mobility of ICT devices and network access points around the home, thus deconstructing the old-school opposition between 'fixed'/cabled domestic media technologies – the television at the hearth of the household – and 'mobile' personal devices which cross over into public space. 'Private' media consumption and communications technology is itself increasingly unanchored from fixed spaces within the home, capable of being 'ported' or carried from living room to study to bedroom. These may seem like relatively trivial and micro-level versions of mobility, undeserving of the label of 'nomadic' communication, but I would argue that such wanderings and trajectories nevertheless form part of a shifting media ecology and cultural anthropology in which arenas and

contexts of cultural life that have conventionally been separable – home/school, home/work, family/friends – can all now begin to communicatively interpenetrate and intersect in complex but possibly newly routinized ways. As has been observed, there's 'a need ... to ask "what's new for society about the New Media?" rather than simply "what are the New Media?"' (Flew 2002: 10).

For example, one of the early cultural anxieties about mobile telephony was that it would render users open to mechanisms of surveillance and contactability at all times, blurring cultural categories of public/private in new ways:

the mobile works ambivalently, rendering the subject available within networks of emotional support and contact, but also opening up the continued possibility of critical scrutiny and surveillance ... The 'object weight of communication' implied by the mobile has to be read through the individual's psychological projections of its significance. The mobile can play the part of a technological *injunction* ... as much as a technological *conjunction*.

(Sussex Technology Group 2001: 220)

And though mobile communications have now moved towards increasingly multi-modal and multimedia data streams (Cranny-Francis 2005: 56), some of these anxieties have remained culturally consistent. Catherine A. Middleton has carried out interesting ethnographic work on Canadians' use of BlackBerries, PDA-style devices with miniature keyboards which enable users to access and respond to email while they are on the go:

The BlackBerry does give its users a mechanism to exert control over the management of daily communication tasks, but by virtue of its always-on, always-connected nature, it also reinforces cultures that expect people to be accessible outside normal business hours. Rather than just a tool of liberation for its users, the BlackBerry can also be understood as an artefact that reflects and perpetuates organizational cultures in which individual employees have little control and influence.

(Middleton 2007: 165)

Middleton's conclusion is that 'BlackBerries are loved by their users yet frequently loathed by their users' closest friends and relations', precisely because use of these mobile devices tends to be tied into organizational cultures that 'reinforce overwork and promote unrealistic expectations for employee engagement in their jobs' (Middleton 2007: 175). Any notion of work/life balance is eroded here, as the potential reach of employers'/work issues extends into leisure time and the domestic sphere, possibly even being reinforced as an expectation or requirement of the work culture concerned. Far from being a version of 'mobile privatization' where the home(ly) is carried 'like a shell' of meaning and identity into the outside world, this scenario is one of intrusion into the domestic, or what I would call the 'private mobilization' of work cultures which threatens to deconstruct work/leisure and public/private binaries from the outside in. As such, cultural concerns about 'contactability' which surrounded the mobile phone during its widespread consumer

adoption may now have been partly relocated around always-on email account access, and the cultural labour expectations surrounding this. Far from 'nomadic' communications necessarily being liberating for consumers, they may be restricting for some workers, who become unable to move beyond the range or reach of work communications. Again, we can see a version of the celebratory/condemnatory matrix here, with mobile digital media being linked to specific critical discourses that it is important to continue to bear in mind.

Though I have begun with the 'where' of digital mobile media, and its cultural ramifications, it is not really possible to separate this out from the 'what' and the 'who' of digital culture, and hence these can only really remain analytical, structuring devices. Given that proviso, I now move on to briefly focus more centrally on the issue of media content. Henry Jenkins has argued that one device has become a near-totemic object in discussions of digital culture, but in a way that is related to changes in the delivery and experiencing of digitized content:

The video iPod seems emblematic of the new convergence culture – not because everyone believes the small screen of the iPod is the ideal vehicle for watching broadcast content but because the ability to download reruns on demand represents a major shift in the relationship between consumers and media content.

(Jenkins 2006a: 253)

Now dubbed the 'iPod classic' by Apple, in order to differentiate it from the touchscreen and wi-fi enabled 'iPod Touch', this emblem of convergence culture has largely achieved such status – issues of design aesthetic aside – by virtue of popularizing the personal downloading and organizing of music/video 'libraries' of digital files. Though we might assume the analogue personal stereo to be highly reminiscent in usage to the iPod – both are music-listening devices complete with headphones – there are significant differences. Of the Walkman, Michael Bull's study noted that:

many users have special tapes containing music only listened to on their personal stereo. This music might have some personal association for them functioning as an 'auditory mnemonic' or alternatively might merely put them in the desired mood for the journey or day ahead ... The metaphor of keeping 'on track' is instructive as it indicates a joining together of mood and duration ... [which] reduces the contingency of the relationship between desired mood and time.

(Bull 2000: 19)

However, because of storage limitations with old analogue Walkmans, users either had to carry a few relatively bulky tapes with them, or plan out in advance what music they were likely to want to listen to while they were on the go. Managing mood, by linking types of music to types of journey (to/from work), meant that Walkman users typically were required to assess, in advance, what particular music they would want to make use of. Not having the 'right' tape to play resulted in the personal stereo being deemed useless or 'dysfunctional' (Bull 2000: 20). By contrast,

the storage capacity of iPods – now often comparable to laptop hard drives – means that users can carry their *entire* music collections/libraries with them. iPods enable the portability of vastly more information than seemingly comparable analogue devices, and, of course, with the arrival of the video iPod, such devices became multimedia/multi-modal.

Storing whole media collections of content that can be accessed portably and on demand; this is one of the key shifts and developments of digital culture. Users of the 'iPod classic' can watch television content on the iPod's smallish screen, whether this content is recorded from digital television or a series of files downloaded over the Internet. And they can organize or customize this content in a variety of ways by 'tagging' it with specific categories:

There may also be more spontaneity in the way that we build and use our collections of music and other media in the digital age ... We won't need to think of music simply in terms of artist and album title, or of film and television solely in terms of lead actors and genre. Instead, we'll be able to choose among a much wider range of organizing factors, from mood to date of release.

(Jennings 2007: 81–3)

In this context, media content is no longer schedule-led, nor even necessarily organized by conventional genres, given that individual users can customize the music/media categories within their 'libraries'. Digital culture is, significantly, a culture of 'on-demand' access to content; whether paid for or shared peer-to-peer, users expect to be able to access media content when they want to and where they want to, being bound neither to broadcast times (and places), nor in some cases to official release dates/in-store availabilities (in instances where music tracks are leaked, pre-release, to the Internet).

By rendering massive quantities of media content portable in almost credit-card size devices, objects such as the iPod have radically altered what it means to be a media consumer in the twenty-first century. As P. David Marshall has commented:

the digital media form is ... what I would describe as indiscrete as opposed to the more discrete and defined commodities – films, television programs, albums – that the media industry has produced in the past. ... the technology ... hails us quite differently than a television program or film.

(Marshall 2006: 637)

That is, 'old media' content is transmitted to consumers as finished, fixed 'products' requiring the consumer to participate in the audience identity of watching at specific times/spaces. Digital media culture does not fix media products in quite the same way; consumers can download specific tracks, for example, rather than having to acquire predetermined 'albums' of music (Flew 2002: 110). They can also choose the time and place of media consumption, perhaps only downloading and beginning to watch a television series when they know in advance of committing time to it that its narrative reaches a form of conclusion, or that a specific number of episodes/series have already been produced. Television and film hail the consumer as an object to be

recruited, digital culture tends to nail consumers of its media content as co-marketers (Murray 2004: 21) or even 'brand evangelists'. According to Derek Johnson:

Steven Johnson ... describes fans' cross-platform engagement with *Lost* [a TV show available through iTunes - MH] as evangelism, where the multiplatformed experiences and discoveries of a minoritarian hardcore audience work to interest greater numbers of viewers. ... While in the later 1990s online content was seen as a 'magnet' for attracting fans ... the multiplatforming practices of the twenty-first century were conceived as means to make fans into magnets for building viewership.

(Johnson 2007: 68)

Despite these changes, and the seeming encouragement of consumer interaction along with the rise in the nomadic audiences' 'power' over when and where to consume media texts, Mary Talbot has cautioned against doing away with models of media power, noting that 'receiving "officially approved messages" in podcasts is no different from receiving them in other formats' (Talbot 2007: 173). And Derek Johnson's (2007) analysis of digital television/multi-platform audiences similarly recognizes the need not to overstate increases in audience 'power', thereby retaining a critical focus on how media producers continue to attempt to manage what are deemed industrially acceptable forms of audience activity.

Digital media content which can now be readily accessed and consumed via mobile, portable devices are not, of course, restricted to commercial music and film/television. A further way in which digital media culture has evolved is towards not just content that can be customized/collected by consumers, but also towards the increased creation of user-generated content. This user-generated content (UGC) can be camera phone images (see Gye 2007) or captured digital video which once taken on a portable, personal device can then be uploaded to the web and shared at sites such as YouTube:

By mid-2005 ... the moral concern associated with camera phones shifted ... to the moral outrage occasioned by the British phenomenon of 'happy slapping' ... this panic inadvertently confirmed the entertainment value that could be extracted from the online sharing of camera phone videos and images. ... The giant corporations of cyberspace - News Limited, Yahoo!, Microsoft, Google - all reacted to the perceived potential commercial value of social networking and its capacity to attract user-generated content as entertainment.

(Nightingale 2007: 290)

In her analysis of this situation, Virginia Nightingale suggests that the 'mobility of the camera phone increases the likelihood that it will be used for controversial purposes' (2007: 291). 'Happy slapping' has been just one example of such controversy; this is the term given to attacks on members of the public by camera phone-toting youngsters who then video these incidents and post the recordings online. Innocent bystanders can thus become the targets of humiliating online footage, and though this may be thought of as a minor infringement or prank, it can

also be thought of as a new type of mediation-led criminal activity; attacks on people in public space, motivated largely by the desire to digitally film and upload such exploits to online user communities. As Nightingale points out:

the online user community is routinely expected to share the burden of site surveillance. ... advertisers are attracted to the ... interest that the presence of controversial material generates, but cannot risk their products being linked to content that might damage brand images.

(Nightingale 2007: 291)

The increasing integration of mobile image-making technology into everyday life has thus not been without its flash points and moral panics, and again not without critical commentaries. But looking beyond these headlines and spectacular transgressions, the rise in online sharing of UGC derived from mobile digital camera (phone)s suggests that digital culture will continue to see a far wider range of media content providers and generators than ever before.

Having said that, though, major media corporations, established brands and key players are all highly likely to retain their positions of professional power. UGC tends to lack markers of media professionalism, often being relatively low-resolution, non-broadcast-quality digital 'reality footage'. However, this 'guerilla' or 'underground' media-making does carry values and connotations of rebellious authenticity, as opposed to the professional, high-gloss values of the media mainstream. And UGC taken from camera phone images has found a place within the era of twenty-four-hour rolling live news, with broadcasters such as the BBC's *News 24* willing to use relatively low-resolution digital coverage from members of the public who have witnessed natural disasters, freak weather conditions, and so on (see Chapter 3).

If mobile digital communications technology has facilitated an expansion in sources of media content (one of the 'whats' of nomadic/mobile communication), as well as allowing audiences to access content in new ways and increasingly on their own terms (the 'where'), then it has also posed new possibilities for the 'who' of media culture, or the articulation of self-identity via:

an increasing desire to personalize media. This personalization is enacted further through the use of iPods and MP3 players that allow individuals to download and then program their playlists and thereby eliminate the mediating of broadcast radio. The rapid expansion of mobile phones, PDAs and Blackberries, with a variety of features including cameras, downloadable ringtones, different skins to accessorize their look ... further underlines how New Media personalizes one's media use and environment.

(Marshall 2006: 638)

This personalization, or cultural process of individualization, suggests that digital culture from mobile telephony onwards into iPod use, and beyond, has been powerfully linked to forms of self-identity, self-expression and self-display (see below). P. David Marshall argues that media representations - images of others and social/cultural groups - have begun to be displaced in the cultural imaginary by 'New Media forms of presentation' (Marshall 2006: 644). People are beginning to routinely

produce and consume images of themselves, whether these are created as profile images for social networking sites, as avatars, or within practices of personal digital photography. And though it may be assumed that different generations of New Media users are more or less comfortable with these developments, it can no longer be assumed that mobile digital media are limited only to the young. In such a context, self-identity is not only presented and displayed through the embodied self, and attention needs to be paid to 'the ways in which individuals present, or construct, their identities [online via] ... the aesthetics and construction methods of ... "bricolage"' (Lister et al. 2003: 246).

Certainly, such processes of self-presentation are evidently not only an outcome of mobile digital media, and a massive body of scholarly work has analysed these shifts in relation to cyberculture more widely. But it can certainly be argued that the rise in consumer take-up of mobile digital media has accelerated and contributed to these cultural patterns. One further emblem of this process, other than the video iPod mentioned by Jenkins (2006a), is the way in which mobile telephones have become multimedia devices working 'not simply as communicative conduits but also as "handy" or pocket containers of data, media content, photo archives and secure microworlds' (Richardson 2007: 205). As micro-worlds of the self, current mobiles promise much more than merely ways of texting, emailing or speaking to social contacts or loved ones. They may proffer possibilities of nomadic communication, but they also work to mirror and secure the self-identities of their owners thanks to stored media content, phonebooks and saved texts. Akin to the proverbial yuppies' filofax of the 1980s – a bound paper file in which allegedly all crucial information about the owner's life and social world could be kept – mobile phones have become culturally and ideologically loaded objects, made to ontologically secure and carry presentations of self-identity. There is an irony or possible paradox here. The proliferating range of devices aimed at liberating consumers from the fixed places and times of older analogue media have, perhaps, ended up reinforcing and fixing presentations of self-identity through their customizable, multimedia and data-storage capacities. But versions of Raymond Williams's 'mobile privatization', the extending of 'private' self-identities and consumer tastes/images into public spaces, have also met their match through what I have termed 'private mobilizations' of work culture, and the erosion of cultural boundaries between public and private from the outside in, as well from the inside out.

## Recommended reading

Flew, Terry (2002) *New Media: An Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jenkins, Henry (2002) Interactive Audiences? in D. Harries (ed.) *The New Media Book*, pp. 157–70. London: British Film Institute.

Jenkins, Henry, (2006) *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York and London: New York University Press.

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# Case Study: Social networking and self-identity

Matt Hills

In the preceding chapter I noted that 'nomadic' digital media tend to be defined in symbiotic relationship to fixed-point PCs thought of as storage or uploading centres. Of course, this situation may well change as portable devices are able to carry more and more data as well as being wi-fi-enabled themselves (like the iPod Touch, although this is currently not blessed with much in the way of data storage). The current situation means that services and sites thought of as culturally significant within mobile digital culture – YouTube or Flickr, for example – can involve the uploading of digital files which are captured on the move, but which may then be posted online through (relatively) fixed-point PCs. And social networking sites such as Facebook might also, similarly, involve the sharing of digital images taken on camera phones or dedicated digital cameras, which may then be uploaded and accessed through a variety of less portable/nomadic PCs.

However, it is interrelated to home and work PCs, the rise in digital mobile media has arguably had a major impact on concepts of self-identity for generations of devoted users – not just college students – and it is this issue that I want to zero in on in more detail here. P. David Marshall has noted that:

among American University students the pervasive use of Facebook.com and Myspace.com is remarkable. These sites are organized to connect friends, but also provide techniques for checking out others. ... These kinds of sites describe the wider proliferation of the presentation of the self.

(Marshall 2006: 639)

University students may be able to access such sites through fixed-point university networks, but given that Facebook is no longer restricted to those with education-based email addresses, its potential constituency is massive, with users' primary access points now becoming potentially mobile, as well as being based within the home (some workplaces have begun to block access, however, given fears over lost worker productivity). The site began life as a US phenomenon largely limited to college students, a cultural space which Victor Burgin has argued is and was especially liminal, being particularly linked to experiments with identity, and hence to forms of narcissism:

American colleges still actively cultivate a familial atmosphere. The dormitory room is a transitional space. It lies between the primitive space of



society ... For [object-relations psychoanalyst] Winnicott, 'this area of playing is not inner psychic reality. It is outside the individual, but it is not the external world'. What better description could we have of the space of the Internet?

(Burgin 2004: 51-2)

For Burgin, the US college system is one which liminally acts between 'child' and 'adult' identities, being precisely transitional, and thus combining elements of play, child-like assumed omnipotence and adult responsibility. His perhaps rather overblown conclusion is that the Internet, in sum total, corresponds to this state of playfulness and liminality between reality and fantasy. A more measured conclusion – though even then, one which may be prone to overgeneralization – would be to view the early rise of Facebook as linked to these cultural meanings and processes of transition; adopted by a generation of users placed at similar stages in the life course, collectively on the cusp of cultural categories of child/adult, Facebook would seem to offer the possibility for identity play and experimentation as a potentially narcissistic vehicle for one's visibility to others:

We must be careful ... not to lose sight of genuinely new modes of identity play in networked media. Indeed, in some ways cyberculture does not so much ignore 'lived experience' as argue that we are more and more 'living' in networks, a union of the immediate and the mediated.

(Lister et al. 2003: 254)

And while Facebook has been thought of most centrally, of course, in relation to social networking, what this sometimes misses out is the extent to which Facebook and its ilk, with their 'union of the immediate and the mediated', place a new-found digital-cultural emphasis on the presentation of self. Such an emphasis typically hinges on, and reinforces, the use of mobile digital media to capture and image moments of self-expression, identity and play.

For example, one has a Facebook Profile picture along with a customizable Profile space where all sorts of applications including 'virtual bookshelves' and 'music collections' can be set up. Consumer taste is thus heavily foregrounded; friends can rank and review movies, and gauge their compatibility with others' interests. Self-identity is explicitly made a matter of one's assorted enthusiasms and fandoms. But the self is not just presented through fan-consumer identities; given the centrality of the Profile picture, users tend to update these frequently, and they become a short hand for changing, up-to-the-minute performances of self. As Lisa Gye has argued of personal camera phone use, by 'reinforcing the intensely personal, camera phones may also participate in this narrow economy of self' (2007: 286). And the Facebook Profile picture seems to form a part of this 'narrow economy of self'; different subgenres of picture have emerged, ranging from the 'glamour' shot in which the self is seemingly auto-objectified for others and thought of as a type of 'model', to the potentially resistant 'quirky' or non-representational picture where object correlatives or abstract images stand in for the self.

Profile pictures have also started to be thought of as corresponding to a type of photographic opportunity while users are on the go or participating in offline social events; for instance, on a summer break at the UK's south coast in 2007, I encountered young holidaymakers who were no longer posing simply for holiday snaps; instead, they were self-reflexively and quite self-consciously 'taking Facebook Profile pictures' on Brighton Pier. The fact that Facebook Profile pictures are thought of as constituting a specific genre or mode of photo is evident from the fact that at least some users have championed 'Anti Profile' pictures of themselves, that is, images which are deliberately and knowingly less than 'perfected', posed and wholly flattering shots.

Mobile digital technologies like personal photography and image-capture may be culturally evolving not just towards the creation of UGC such as 'reality' footage but also towards altered and increasingly 'photographic' conceptions of self-image. As Lisa Gye observes, digital cameras and camera phones 'are set to extend our way of looking at the world photographically and in doing so bring changes to how we understand ourselves' (2007: 287).

The use of camera phones to generate images that commemorate and testify to one's presence at specific cultural events has also become a significant use of these technologies, and gig-going, for example, has become a massively mediated cultural ritual, as Chris Chesher has observed:

Once the U2 show itself started ... people in the audience started using their mobile phones in a different way [i.e. not to contact others in the audience – MH]. They held them up, pointed them towards the stage, and began recording the show as still images or video. ... The sound is invariably distorted, with the screams of nearby fans overriding the music. Videophones therefore produce a cinema of convenience, not a deep relationship with the moving image.

(Chesher 2007: 222)

But this 'cinema of convenience' or digital still-photography of the same status, seems to be conceptualized, culturally, in the same way as Facebook profile pictures; it is recorded via mobile devices precisely in order to be shared online as a marker of one's cultural taste, and one's consumer status ('I was there'). As Chesher goes on to observe:

[I]n the weeks following the show, some of these phone and digital camera images circulated further from the stadium ... The images were available most easily on the Internet, where photo-sharing sites ... and video-sharing sites ... made these files and media streams available around the world.

(Chesher 2007: 222-3)

P. David Marshall argues that this concept of the self (and its activities) as a series of images anticipating the scrutiny of online others leads to a new kind of 'public privacy' in which the self is constantly and narcissistically performed, auto-objectified, for an imagined audience:

With photos and other personal details, Facebook and Myspace generate public privacy into a new form of narcissism. This narcissism is actualized through New Media and it is specifically modalized around a mediatized version of the self: the representations of celebrity have now been liberated to become the basis for the potential public presentation of the self.

(Marshall 2006: 639–40)

The proliferation of mobile digital media and communications technology appears to have partially democratized image-making and media creation, but at the same time it has arguably extended the cultural regimes of specific types of image along with potentially narcissistic concepts of selfhood. Rather than interpreting the U2 fans he considered ethnographically as narcissistically imaging themselves, Chesher analyses this use of mobile image-making as a corrective to, or at least a variant perspective on, the 'professional' image-making strategies surrounding live rock concerts:

Many personal blogs featured images and reports on the shows ... Someone who was interested in the U2 show would get a very different impression watching these clips by comparison with the professionally edited live videos. They would see a fragmented composite of amateur images from different positions, evidence of a multiplicity of experiences.

(Chesher 2007: 222–3)

However, critical as well as celebratory readings are possible with regard to this New Mediatization. It could be argued that by gathering and posting such concert footage clips, fans are presenting themselves as bearers of high levels of fan cultural capital (broadly speaking, fan status that would be recognized as such by fellow fans). Rather than simply witnessing and digitally mediating events such as this pop concert, such uses of digital cameras and camera phones can be interpreted as forming a further part of personal image-making. Posting this type of content reflects on the user's online identity and bears future imagined audiences' approval in mind.

The rise in digital cultures of narcissism and 'public privacy', in Marshall's terms, has also meant that mechanisms for protecting the relative 'privacy' of data are called for:

Users are generally happy for certain types of personal data to be published as long as their privacy is protected – and it is seen to be protected. When the Facebook social network redesigned its service so that it was easier to track when other people had posted new journals or photos, users rebelled, claiming that it made it too easy to indulge in stalker behaviour.

(Jennings 2007: 192)

Although nomadic communications and mobile image-captures may be 'brought back' to Facebook profiles, users seem to favour the notion that not each and every of their online additions should be trackable, in general and in principle, by a mass, unknown audience. Privacy levels can be modified by Facebook users, and

restricted to 'friends', but the importance of the Profile photo is that this will show up as visible to unknown others. As such, the cultural circulation of the Profile pic cannot be hemmed in or dictated by the self, and it hence functions as the *lingua franca*, or the perfectly exchangeable self-as-commodity, of Facebook.

The articulation of nomadic/mobile communications media with cultural constructions and expressions of self-identity has also been testified to in Ingrid Richardson's work on 'pocket technospaces'. Richardson argues that mobile telephones have become powerful symbolic bearers of the self, especially by acting as storage spaces for what is felt to be intensely personal data:

We both desire and know the impossibility of achieving a neat, compact, and foldable being-in-the-world. Yet this 'as-if' sense of containment is a common experience of mobile phone users; interviewees in my study frequently referred to their phones as microcosms of their lives, far exceeding the containment capacities of wallets and handbags.

(Richardson 2007: 213)

iPods may also act in this way, of course, furnishing the user with an aesthetic and informational sense of a 'neat ... compact' being-in-the-world which folds together considerable amounts of data, if not whole music collections and assorted photos and videos (see Chapter 6). Perhaps the leading cultural impact and presence of mobile digital media has, which I have suggested here, been their ability to become 'microcosms' of, and mirrors for, presentations of self-identity. Whether it is the Facebook Profile picture, or captured images/footage of leisure events such as high-profile rock concerts, or iPod music libraries, varieties of mobile digital media have not simply acted as additions to prior cultural practices and discourses. Rather, in a range of ways digital mobility appears to be presaging and supporting broader shifts in cultural activity, partly away from the consumption of media representations and partly towards the conceptualization of the self as a presentational image directed at imagined others, as well as a symbolic entity 'contained' and carried in personal digital devices.