LIQUID SPACE AND TIME

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The liquidizing powers have moved from the 'system' to 'society', from 'politics' to 'life-policies'—or have descended from the 'macro' to the 'micro' level of social cohabitation (Bauman 2000, p. 7).

Introduction

This article theorises the effects of the mobile phone phenomenon upon the spatial and temporal dynamics of everyday life. It contends that more than any other connectable networkable device, the mobile phone transforms the experience of space and time for individuals and collectivities. Moreover, its importance seems set to become even more central as it rapidly transforms from simple voice-carrier to powerful communicating device that will allow the transmission and reception of increasingly rich data that includes video, Internet and data-processing uses. This transformation, I argue, serves to liquify time and space. The mobile phone, as part of an array of networkable devices and applications that make up the 'network society', brings what David Harvey calls 'time-space' compression to new levels of intensity. In so doing it is shaping a new form of subjectivity—a 'virtual self'—that has the potential to either trap or liberate.

It's all Talk (or text)

It has become almost trite to write about the rapid spread of mobile phones across the world, so deeply are they already inserted into the consciousness of people in their daily lives. And the number of users continues to grow. The developed countries are already saturated markets; and developing countries are building networks and adding new users at an ever increasing pace. Today there are an estimated 1.6 billion users worldwide, a number that will almost double by 2009 (IT Facts 2005). By the second decade of this century almost half of humanity will have mobile communications access. For many of these, especially in the developed countries, it won't look or act like a simple voice-carrier anymore, and 'mobile phone' or 'cell-phone' will have become a quaint misnomer from what will seem like eons ago.

The mobile phone already has its own legends and mythologies, and these too have inserted themselves into the cultural consciousness with a familiarity approaching banality. We know from news media about the farmers in Mali or Honduras or Pakistan or wherever, who use cheap mobile network access to keep abreast of daily (or hourly)
commodity prices that emanate from cities they can hardly imagine, much less visit. Nonetheless, we hear that they are being ‘empowered’ by this tiny wonder, and that they now have a toe (if not quite two feet) on the level-playing field of globalisation and are busily making the ICT revolution work for them. We are familiar with stories of, for example, the sailor who was stranded in her yacht, 1500 kilometres from land and with a broken engine, but was able to call the nearest land-point and give them her precise position through the mobile phone’s GPS-enabled function. We can extrapolate this news story / urban myth to the rock climber, bush walker, or the driver of a broken-down car—all of whom would have surely perished but for the marvellous capabilities of mobile telephony.

We now know the mobile phone’s big stories, but there are num-
berless micro-narratives that we create and experience ourselves. Mass usage has meant that we have quickly developed a keen sense of its social-psychological effects. For example, we smile, somewhat guiltily, about our dependence on these devices; but frowned when we are ‘out of range’, or are going through a tunnel mid-conversation, or when the batteries give up. We roll our eyes when we hear stories of mobiles going off in the middle of a play in a theatre, or at a meeting, or in a class, or during a funeral service. We nevertheless covertly check ours for messages as often as we used to glance at our watch. We look up to nod in vigorous agreement about the person who will insist on talking loudly in restaurants, or in shops, into their phones. We groan about having to hear their stilted and vacuous-sounding conversations with a spectral ‘virtual presence’ that is the speaker’s interlocutor. Most satisfyingly, however, we allow ourselves to feel superior in our knowledge and familiarity with this technological marvel in comparison to those sorry parvenus who haven’t quite got the message about ‘mobile etiquette’.

We know about the functionality of mobile phones. We constantly experiment with it and seek to exploit its capabilities in an ongoing process of user-scrutiny. Interestingly, we seem to express a thirst for technical knowledge here that was strangely lacking with earlier mass produced electronic devices such as VCRs. Texting is but the latest example of this fad-from-function dynamic. We learn how to text from our sons or daughters, and then try our skills out on people we used to speak with. And our kids master it alongside practising with their knives and forks. Indeed for millions of young and not-so-young people across the world ‘text has become the new sex’, replacing the real thing in postmodern relationships (Encarnacao 2003). We learn the mobile phone’s secrets with what appears on the surface to be a degree of autonomy and control over our relationship with it. We give the impression of having become savvy with its capabilities. It has become a part of us, always in our hand, or to hand on a table, in a pocket or bag, with senses unconsciously tuned for its calling us to it. We seem relaxed with it. It is no longer an austere looking and expensive business tool, but an artefact that inhabits every register of culture and society.
Mobile phone sellers tell us that the model and level of customisation ‘define the owner’. So en masse we go about defining ourselves through it, competing with friends or even strangers over the models we use. Which is the coolest? Which is me? Nokia or Ericsson? Vodafone or Motorola? Even the network carriers have become symbols replete with meaning and distinction: should we choose Orange or T-Mobile or BT or Telstra? Which of the thousands of available ring tones says something about who I am? A short passage from Mahler’s Symphony No. 6, recognisable only to other cognoscenti, or a few bars of Beyonce or The Simpsons that we all recognise?

The power and versatility of mobile phones expand, seemingly every month. We can play increasingly sophisticated computer games on it. It delivers to us news updates, job vacancies, advertisements for just about anything, sports results and even exam results. We can shop through it, and soon we will be able to use it as a credit card to shop even more. We can listen to and share MP3 files, receive and send email, and watch television. Millions of users take digital pictures, make short movies and send these to the phones or computers of anyone, anywhere, who is connected. And they do all this as they get smaller in size. All this only 15 or so years after Arthur Daley, in an episode of the TV show Minder, could only think to use his brick-sized phone to call his local pub from his car to inform a bemused Dave at the Winchester that he was only three minutes away.

We know about all these things because the mobile phone has become so ubiquitous so quickly that they have become part of the ‘social fabric’ (Cole 2005)—but what does this mean? Many claims have been made about the effects of the ‘information society’ or ‘network society’. For example, sociologist Daniel Bell argued that the most crucial effect of ICTs is that they have created a radically new set of contexts that pervade all aspects of society and reorder all older social, cultural and economic relationships (1989). Note the use of the acronym ‘ICT’. The mobile phone is but an element in the digital totality that is the network society. It is, however, a central element, a key technology, in the radical reordering of society that information technologies are making possible. Indeed, as I shall argue, ICTs are forcing the pace, nature and direction of change in ways, and through technological means, that even someone as prescient as Daniel Bell, writing not so long ago, could not have imagined.

**Technology and the (post)Modern society**

To understand more clearly the effects of the mobile phone a few things need to be said about the role of technologies in society and our relationship to them. In social theory there are two main ways of looking at how technologies function in modern society. First, and usually the most easily dispensed with in academic debate, is the theory of technological determinism. As the term suggests, it is a
theory which gives a defining role to technology as the shaper of society. It is a technology-led theory of social change where people and institutions simply conform to technological developments. Classic examples are claims that the advent of the printing press, or television or even the Internet, 'changed society' (Chandler 1995). This process is problematical, determinists would argue, if or when the rate and complexity of change is such that people can no longer keep up (Rippin 2005). Such theorising (and theorists) tend to be thin on the ground in the social sciences, precisely because insufficient agency is given to social forces, such as culture, economy and politics. Indeed, to argue a theory of 'technological determinism' is often to court ridicule for being naive, or if not naive, then in some way vaguely authoritarian.

On the other hand, a social determinism argues that it is society—people, and institutions such as politics, government and the economy, which function in complex, dialectical ways to shape technology which then in turn shapes society. The theory argues that people can 'adopt or reject' technologies as autonomous 'consuming agents'. As Hannah Rippin explains:

Politics, economics, culture and organisation are crucial to the invention, design, adoption and implementation of technology. The ways in which technologies are required and used by society are driven by market forces, and the adoption or rejection of technologies are shaped by social action. The design and production of the technology will be shaped by technologists, but the ultimate choice lies with the consuming agents of society. Technological artefacts, although introduced into society, are not forced upon it (2005) (emphasis added).

Variations of Rippin's account of social determinism or 'co-determination' have become the acceptable face of technological development. The argument satisfies a deep-set logic within the social sciences to emphasise the social and the 'ultimate' power it wields. As the now-classic textbook on the subject by Mackenzie and Wajcman argues:

We will take technological change as a given, as an independent factor, and think through our social actions as a range of (more or less) passive responses. If, alternatively, we focus on the effect of society on technology, then technology ceases to be an independent factor. Our technology becomes, like our economy or political system, an aspect of the way we live socially (1985, p. 3).

In some ways this line is unarguable as it gives a shaping role to both society and technology. It underscores the sensible idea that it would be difficult to think of circumstances where people have ever been completely passive in respect of technology or anything else. Agency, resistance, or the thinking of alternatives is part of what it is to be Human in the world (Williams 1979, p. 252). However, it is also important to recognise that in the debates over technological or social determinism, the examples given are almost always those concerning
individual technologies. Rippin, in her otherwise useful article on the mobile phone, is but the latest analyst to display this intellectual tic, citing the personal stereo—and in the context of the wider argument—the mobile phone itself as exemplars of ‘co-determination’ (Rippin 2005).

In an almost throwaway line in a posting to the Media Ecology listserv, media theorist Rob Blechman (2005) nonetheless dramatically opens up the lens to a wider angle on this argument. He writes:

Why does technological determinism have such a bad rep? While I always hold out for individual freedom and choice and I don’t discount the impact of public policy, I believe that across large periods of time and large populations a case can be made for the determining effects of technology. Recent attention paid to the effects of natural climate change on the rise and fall of civilisations and the potential of ‘man-made’ greenhouse gases to bring an end to our civilisation should bring discussion of technological determinism into the forefront of the debate (Blechman 2005).

Systems of technology, in other words, can have systemic effects. The countless technologies that combine to contribute to global warming are having a determining effect upon nature. I think what is at issue here is that we should no longer take technologies (either as ‘evolved’ from earlier versions, or from other ‘branches’ of technology) as discrete analytical forms. This is especially the case with computer-based technologies. Accordingly, the mobile phone is not simply the particularly clever progeny of the first mobile phone developed by Bell Labs in the 1940s. It is not a technology that mysteriously fired the popular imagination in the 1990s to become incredibly prevalent. The mobile phone is a part of the wider revolution in ICTs that have transformed society since the late 1970s. As I will argue, it is beginning to express or represent, what the network society is and what it may become. It is, in other words, part of a digital logic, a systemic force that transcends the effects of any single technology. It requires, in fact, a category shift in thinking about technology to understand the significance of this (Robins & Webster 1999, pp. 72–5). Generalised computerisation has given technology a new social and cultural force. Michael Heim expresses this in his analysis of Heidegger when he writes that:

...technology enters the inmost recesses of human existence, transforming the way we know and think and will. Technology is, in essence, a mode of human existence, and we could not appreciate its mental infiltrations until the computer became a major cultural phenomenon (1993, p. 61).

We can get some appreciation of this if we understand what drives neo-liberal globalisation and the revolution in ICTs. These are interdependent dynamics that constituted what David Harvey called the transition from ‘Fordism to flexible accumulation’—or the wider focus of his argument: the shift from ‘modernity to a postmodernity’ (1989,
pp. 141–72). Furthermore, analysis of the shift to Harvey’s ‘condition of postmodernity’ not only gives a new perspective upon our relationship to (digital) technologies—but also how we experience space and time.

**Neo-liberal Globalisation and the ICT Revolution**

*(the utopian moment)*

A central concept in Harvey’s *The Condition of Postmodernity* is that of ‘time-space compression’. He writes that:

I mean to signal by that term processes that so revolutionize the objective qualities of space and time that we are forced to alter...how we represent the world to ourselves. I use the word ‘compression’ because a strong case can be made that the history of capitalism has been characterized by speed-up in the pace of life, while so overcoming spatial barriers that the world seems to collapse inwards upon us (Harvey 1989, p. 240).

These ‘processes’ began in a deep, systematic and globalising way during the mid-1970s. It was then that so-called ‘crises of Fordism’ brought about the rise of neo-liberalism. This was (and is) a political ideology and economic philosophy that is oriented toward replacing the perceived overly bureaucratic decision-making processes in the economy with allegedly neutral ‘market mechanisms’. This would (it was claimed) restore ‘efficiency’, ‘productivity’, and centrally, *profitability* to economic organisation (Hasan 2003a). Information and communication technologies were key to the realisation of the neo-liberal project. It had long been recognised by managers, politicians and workers that automation and computerisation would be effective against the ‘rigidities’ of a Fordist system that had ‘matured’ and become sluggish and inefficient (Harvey 1989, pp. 125–97). However, during the dog days of the late 1960s and the 1970s, it was Fordism’s consensus-based, planned approach that kept the introduction of automated and computerised systems to a minimum. It did so in order to avoid the social disruption that they were expected to cause in the way of job losses, market dislocation and so on (Kolko 1988).

The 1980s and 1990s saw the forcing through of these ‘solutions’ to the perceived crises. Over these decades neo-liberalism rose to become the hegemonic economic, social and political force. Governments charged with neo-liberal ardour walked away from having a direct role in determining the size, shape and direction of the national (and by extension the global) economy. Unions were fatally weakened in long battles of legislative and workplace attrition; and centrally, ICTs were introduced without restraint to every sector of the economy in the search for computer- and automation-derived ‘efficiencies’ and ‘productivities’. Much of the subsequent story is, as they say, history. The period saw the rise of what Castells called the ‘network society’ (1996). For Castells, the emergence of the networked society represented a Kuhnian ‘paradigm shift’ where digital information technologies took
centre stage as a highly flexible and pervasive techno-logic that incorporated and transformed into a singular connecting system the range of older and more disparate processes and dynamics that existed within economy, society and culture (1996, pp. 61–2).

It is the rapid creation of the network society, a society of so-called 'ubiquitous computing' that allowed for the intensification and extension of Harvey's time-space compression in the service of the innermost dynamics of capitalism. Spatially, this meant the use of computerisation and computer networks to 'annihilate' distance in the creation of a single, global, virtual and interconnected market-space. In tandem with this process was the temporal acceleration of the economy (and society) through the insertion of the digital logic into every nook and cranny of life in order to increase the rate of turnover and boost profitability (Rifkin 2000; Sabelis 2004). The faster things move in the economy, the rationale goes, the better and more efficient, and hence more profitable, they will be. Aside from the vague notions of 'friction-free capitalism' that used to fill the head of Bill Gates in his pursuit of the utopian moment, the creation of the network society was not part of a planned, neo-liberalisation of the planet. It was, rather, the unplanned evolutionary effect of hundreds of millions of decisions, taken every day by people in business and in government in the context of the new political environment created by neo-liberal ideology. The consequences, in the context of social and economic acceleration, were bound to be unanticipated. Still, there is no doubting the resultant power of networks to mobilise and transform society. As Castells puts it:

Networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies, and the diffusion of networking logic substantially modifies the operation and outcomes in processes of production, experience, power, and culture. While the networking form of social organisation has existed in other times and spaces, the new information technology paradigm provides the material basis for its pervasive expansion throughout the entire social structure (1996, p. 469).

What does all this say about the mobile phone? First, as a networked device, we have to see it as more than a hand-held, personal contraption like a Sony Walkman or even an Apple iPod. It is an interactive network communications tool that places the user in the virtual spaces and times of the network: the meat in the sandwich of time-space compression, if you will. As a technology, its social shaping or co-determination by active users or agents is in fact minimal. It amounts to a 'choice' over the aesthetics of this or that model, or over the extent of its possible functions (usually shaped or 'determined' by one's means to pay for them). The mobile phone, however, has a determining influence over people and cultures, economies and societies. Not as a discrete technology, but as part of a wider digital logic, a network 'morphology' that 'substantially modifies' what we do and
what we are. The network of which it is part is a metatechnology that *comprises* our political system, our economic system (globalisation) as well as culture and society more generally. The network is part of the 'social fabric', but the fabric has ceased to be diverse and open. Instead, overwhelmingly, the logic of this metatechnology ensures that it is 'closed' (not open to alternatives) and oriented towards instrumental and economic goals (Robins & Webster 1999, pp. 129–30).

This preponderance means that we increasingly need to be connected: the network society is where the action is. To be outside it increasingly means social and economic oblivion. Castells refers to people who are excluded as having descended to the status of 'not worth the trouble of exploitation; they will become inconsequential, of no interest to the developing globalized economy' (1996, p. 135). The problem of the 'digital divide' has concerned many people and many governments for at least a decade (Servon 2002). Indeed, the 'problem' has gone to almost the top of the United Nations list of social priorities. For example in 1999 UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan observed that:

> People lack many things: jobs, shelter, food, health care and drinkable water. Today, being cut off from basic telecommunications services is a hardship almost as acute as these other deprivations and may indeed reduce the chances of finding remedies to them. Telecommunications is not just an issue for the telecommunications minister of each country, but for ministers of education, health and many others (1999).

Today the mobile phone is considered a basic communications service, as is access to the Internet. But the need, let us be clear, is wholly economic. We do not need a mobile phone in the same way as we need potable water. Governments and businesses want us to have them and to use them to become productive, to become profitable nodes in the network to sell to or to buy from.

Speed is the essence of the network society; it is what makes it possible. The pursuit of speed in the pursuit of profit drags people into its logic and compels them to constantly try to synchronise with 'network time' (Hassan 2003b). Accordingly, the 'need for speed' (and the profitability of the ICT industries) require that we need constantly to purchase faster, more powerful, more functional devices in order to be more 'efficient', more 'productive' and to stay connected. If we don't then it's not a simple matter of social embarrassment because your friends can't contact you. It becomes a curtailment of your life chances. Nowadays workers need to be immediately contactable—as do customers, clients, bosses, suppliers, teachers, child-carers, retailers, government offices and so on. Increasingly, to not have a mobile phone, or a PC with internet access, is to invite economic (as well as social) eclipse. And so the 'dependence' upon the mobile that we uncomfortably smile about with our friends has a very serious undercurrent which ensures that we really cannot do without it.
Seen as part of a neo-liberal network society the mobile phone ceases to be such a user friendly and optional lifestyle extra. Rather, it functions as part of a systemic technological determinism that stems from a networked system that is almost wholly oriented towards instrumentalised economic tasks. It is a new form of determinism that emanates not from the interaction of humans and a specific technology, but from that between humans and a generalised techno-logic. It succeeds, despite the 'co-determination' theories to the contrary, and despite our efforts to become savvy users, because for most people '...technology is a mystery and it remains a mystery even when its technical functions are explained in simplified terms, because its genesis—its social history—is ignored' (Robins & Webster 1999, p. 74).

The 'genesis' of the mobile phone is not on the laboratory benches of Bell Labs in the 1940s. The real genesis is in the logic of networked neoliberalism, the need to create a digital economy that, at its optimum, 'annihilates' space and time (the physical world and its societies) in the service of capital accumulation. Insofar as the mobile phone has a 'social' function such as communicating with friends or family, its deterministic force trains us only to be yet more dependent upon it and further 'ignorant' of its 'genesis'. And that they are in widespread use amongst school-age children serves also to inculcate them into the necessity and strange inevitability of pervasive connectability. It is a training that will prepare them for life and work in the much larger and more serious business end of the network society.

**Liquid Space and Time**

What does this new form of systemic technological determinism do to our relationship with time and space? I argue that the spatial and temporal are mutually implicating social categories, *social constructions* that are subject to constant change. Let us look briefly at this idea, separating, for the sake of clarity, space from time.

We create space. This can be illustrated at an easily understandable level if one thinks about the construction of the built environment. Towns and cities (or the extension to your bathroom), for example, are built landscapes where socially produced space comes into existence where none existed before. Henri Lefebvre, in *The Production of Space*, calls this 'spatial practice' and the form and function this takes stems from the 'production and reproduction' characteristics of 'each social formation' (1991, p. 33). This is the production of the physical and material spatial 'flows, transfers and interaction [that] occur in and across space in such a way as to assure production and social reproduction' (Harvey 1989, p. 218). The *kinds* of space that are produced depend not only upon the forms of production and reproduction in each society, but the *interpenetrations* of social and cultural contexts that shape them. Thus, Lefebvre writes that '...space may be said to embrace a multitude of intersections, each with its assigned location' (1991, p. 33).
We create time. Barbara Adam has pioneered a social theory of
time which argues that humans construct temporal experience and
move through what she calls ‘timescapes’ (1998). These are intersec-
tions of temporal relations that are expressed through ‘clusters of
temporal features, each implicated in all the others but not necessarily
of equal importance in each instance’ (Adam 2004, p. 143). Time, for
Adam, is something that is emergent, a ‘becoming and living duration’
(2004, p. 55) the experience and creation of which we draw from par-
ticipating in the social realm and in the ‘the multitude of times that
interpenetrate and permeate our lives’ (1995, p. 12). Accordingly, like
the spatial production with which it is indissolubly bound up, the
kinds of time that are produced depend upon the context—the forms
of production and reproduction in each society. Crucially, our seem-
ingly innate predisposition towards technicity has a powerful role in
the creation of socially produced spaces and times. To cite one
eexample: the 200-year-old domination of clock time, an alienating and
abstract form of time reckoning, displaced other forms of time and
other ways of creating and experiencing timescapes (Thompson 1967;
Nowotny 1994; Hassan 2003a). The key to understanding the nature of
this relationship is control and where it resides. As Adam puts it in
respect of our relationship with time through history: ‘the quest for
control is to a large extent about obtaining dominion over time for

Modernity and its related dynamics of industrialism and
Enlightenment thought was fundamentally about control and how to
shape and plan human existence in accordance with the ‘laws’ of
reason and logic. Modernity was a project that aimed to bring the
unruly and irrational spaces and times of premodern society under
rational control. The emergence of a postmodernity changes this
underlying philosophy of control. And the ‘condition of postmoder-
nity’ has been created, fundamentally, through the social and political
transformations that began in the 1970s—through the rise of neo-lib-
eralism and the ICT revolution we discussed earlier.

The creation of the neo-liberal network society created, and con-
tinues to create, the primary context upon which new forms of social
(spatial and temporal) production and reproduction take place. The
network society is radically different from the societies of modernity and
premodernity. In many ways it is a parallel ‘virtual’ world, albeit one that
increasingly dominates our ‘real’ world. It is the context(s) of numberless
spaces and times that are constructed and experienced virtually and dig-
itionally through the hypermediation of ICTs. It grows exponentially as the
‘informationalisation’ of society continues apace. It is a metacontext ‘gov-
erned’ by the irrationality of market forces. And it is a metacontext where
no one is in control by virtue of the abrogation of political control over
the shape, nature and direction of economic life (Giddens 1999).

The network society, as Castells famously observed a decade ago,
is constituted by new forms of time and space, what he termed a
‘timeless time’ and a ‘space of flows’ (1996). Here ‘real-time’ information flows are at the same time technologically constructed virtual ‘spaces’ where connections are made, be they through emails, video and so on. I have discussed Castells’ notion of ‘timeless time’ elsewhere, and argued that, like ‘real time’, it is not a particularly useful way to conceptualise network temporality (Hassan 2003b). However, the concept of ‘flows’ is, especially if we use it to analyse what happens to both socially constructed space and time within the network society. I argue that it is the flow of space and time that fundamentally constitutes the network society. These disperse through the network in the form of information, of digital bits and bytes that are actualised as a social context in the act of connection—when people, speak, meet, see, hear, read and write in cyber space and time.

The increasingly ubiquitous connection is the creation of the context wherein network space and time are generated. The ‘need for speed’ that is the raison d'être of the network society creates the acceleration which ensures that these times and spaces are liquidised: traveling in anything but smooth flows through the capricious and presently uncontrollable dynamics that stem from networked neo-liberalism. The network is sustained by a dense connectability that is comprised of any digital process, application or device that is connectable—and increasingly this means just about every new ICT product that comes to the marketplace.

The Internet acts as the ‘backbone’ for the network. And desktop and laptop computers, PDAs, pagers, digital movie cameras, scanners and so on supply sound, vision and text in an increasing rich-media context as broadband connections begin to dominate. The mobile phone is emerging as the fulcrum or axis upon which these processes and applications converge. It is fast becoming a compact and powerful repository of what were previously discrete elements of network connectability. It was noted at the beginning of this article that the term ‘mobile phone’ will soon become a misnomer. Indeed if we take ‘phone’ to mean ‘voice’ then it already is. We also saw how multifunctionality is the central selling point and core developmental logic in mobile phone technology. That it now incorporates video, text, sound, voice though wireless and internet-based networks means that people are being conscripted (or self-conscripted) into the network on a scale that has, in theory, no limit. ‘Mobile’ or mobility retains its relevance, though; indeed, it moves to the centre of the dynamical process. The definition of mobile as meaning ‘remaining with the person’ also comes close to meaning what Nicholas Negroponte (1995) saw as the melding of ‘bits with atoms’, of bringing individuals into the network as a cyborg part of it to inaugurate a new ontology—literally a new way of being—both in the physical world and in the network of networks.

People are the weakest link in this speed fuelled disorganisation. In the context of a society of liquid space and time, mobile telephony transforms our subjectivity in what is the principal effect of systemic techno-
logical determinism. The ability to orient oneself in the world, in space and time, was a central function of the modernist metanarratives of reason, progress and order. The mobile phone disorients and dislocates this capacity. As Michael Graziano argues in an essay in this edition, ‘The “place” of the phone user becomes...indeterminate, as telephony dislocates the subject from the “body” in which its voice originates, and, in its mobility, from any a priori fixed location’ (pp. 70–1).

This ‘derealisation’ as Graziano observes, is not necessarily a negative development. However, in the overall context of lack of control in a network society dominated by instrumental, economic concerns, it becomes one. Purchasing and using mobile telephones for largely instrumental, business use, to stay connected on pain of economic (and secondarily, social) oblivion, brings an anxiety and unsettledness that is becoming the characteristic marker of our postmodern age. The mobile phone user becomes part of the chaotic flow of information which causes people to both deplore them and find them utterly indispensable. The message becomes the multifunctionality of this particular medium. We can send videos of our children to their grandparents on the other side of the globe for an instant of gratification that soon turns to a sense of lack when we have seen (or sent) the photograph and reflect upon the ‘real’ distances in space and time that prevent face-to-face contact. Walking down the street we can get the phone call that offers a job or gives the sack. Social security officials can now send ‘warning’ text messages to ‘clients’ who have missed a job interview or benefit meeting (Green & Smith 2004, p. 580). Having to be ‘always on’ means always being available to employers, to advertisers, and to people we don’t necessarily want to listen to or see. Being always available brings its constant and stressful interruptions—interruptions we end up seeking as we continually check our phones for email, for text or for voice messages.

**Speed, Mobility and the ‘phenomena of enhanced stupidity’**

Neo-liberalism takes away individual and social control and ICTs flood the vacuum with speed. The result is what Hartmut Rosa terms ‘social acceleration’ where systemic speed ‘compresses the actions and experiences of everyday life’ (2003, p. 9)—with the mobile phone increasingly the pivot point in the process. We connect with the economy of speed and experience ‘social acceleration’ with every glance at our mobile. The network reaches us even when the phone is quiet, so attuned are millions of us to its presence and habituated to its essential unpredictability: it can ring at any time and the thought to use it can enter our head at any time. Its psychological ‘presence’ hovers over us as the network ‘virtually’ encompasses us. It is part of the ‘social fabric’, part of us, as we are part of it; and our increasing dependence upon it causes us to synchronise with its innate temporality—which is open-ended speed. The faster the economy and
society moves, the faster and more comprehensively its functionality reflects it.

Speed and mobility are prime requisites for ‘flexible accumulation’ and the antithesis of Fordism. And the phone provides a good illustration of technological development in the context of a powerful political economy. The telephone in the period of Fordism was fixed in space; a ‘handset’ that sat on a table in the hallway, on the wall, or on the office desk. It was linked to a networked system of telephones, wires that ran underground, overland and all through buildings. This was a planned network that was drawn up by engineers who worked (usually) for government-owned utilities which, through earlier planning, anticipated demand in urban growth centres, city concentrations and so on. They also had a public-private duality: we had ‘home’ phones and ‘business’ phones, representing a strict spatial and temporal separation as to who was likely to call (and at what times) and who we were likely to contact (and when). Moreover, whilst it was certainly part of the ‘social fabric’ in that many people had access to one, it was not all pervasive and invasive of our lives, day and night. The point is that we had relative control over it as a communications device—if only because it was so inflexible and its existence was planned.

The mobile phone has disrupted these modernist sureties. It is of course no longer fixed. Its ubiquity grows unplanned, as a response to chaotic market signals. The market aims for total coverage, to give network access anywhere, anytime. It is no longer a public utility, where the public interest was supposedly served, but a user-pays service. It collapses the divisions between public and private spaces and times, weekdays and weekends, business and leisure, local and global. These all fold into one digital flow, with uncertainty and unpredictability permeating the process. When the ringtone sounds, it could be anyone in the world and anytime: friend, boss, colleague, stranger or computer. It could be a call-centre worker in Bangalore or your ten-year-old child calling from a school science lesson. The mobile phone ‘annihilates’ space and time like no other technology and is a postmodern artefact without peer. We no longer feel that it is something we can control and use with a detachment. But we feel the pressure of needing to have one, to let it rule our lives by constantly checking it, and always wanting a better, faster, cooler and more multifunctional model.

The forms of subjectivity derived from modernity, what Fredric Jameson (1995, pp. 38–9) called its ‘perceptual habits’, are broken up within this networked environment of disorientation and acceleration. The processes of learning, understanding and cognition are implicated here, because these are subjective contexts, ‘perceptual habits’ that have their own temporal rhythms. These take time. Indeed, they take their own contextually time and to rush them or subject them to acceleration or unpredictability, inevitably brings diminishing returns. In many ways this is simple common sense, but in the neo-liberal environment where speed and flexibility are of the essence, this ‘fact’ too often gets over-
looked. And so the radical time-space compression wrought by neoliberal globalisation and the revolution in ICTs—a process articulated so powerfully in the shape of the mobile phone—does not allow adequate time to reflect upon the dynamics that are shaping this world, or the consequences (unintended or not) that stem from them (Beck 1992). In a superb aesthetic thesis of the nature of speed in our culture, titled I Am a Bullet: Scenes from an Accelerating Culture, Dean Kuipers observes that:

Life will never move any slower. Nostalgia [looking back] leads us to believe that acceleration will plane out; achieving some static future state, but perhaps that state will be one of permanent technological and sensory flux...Speeding up is what we do. It is human nature. We are tool users. We will always hunt for a way to do things faster, more efficiently, with less effort and less error. Does it ever gain us anything? Yes and no. Quantum leaps in quality of life come at a price: More tools we can’t live without and which we probably have to work twice as hard to buy...But constantly treading water at the surface of change has consequences. Deeper historical currents flow beneath us. We don’t see them as clearly as we should. Sometimes we don’t feel them at all... (2000, p. 12).

Kuipers argues that we skate along on the thin ice that comprises the surface of the postmodern approach to knowledge and critical understanding. Intensified time-space compression causes us to glide over the deeper realities to which we can remain oblivious. This ‘Jack’ causes us to lose interest in or be unaware of important things that have a direct impact upon us. How does the economy function? What is globalisation and what does it really mean for us? That there is too much information has become a cliché, yet the demands for more ‘flexibility’ and ‘productivity’ ensure that we produce and consume more of it. How does this contribute to ‘efficiency’? Paul Virilio argues that an effect of increased speed is the increased potential gridlock (2000). Informational gridlock (or a slowing down of our ability to properly process and cognate information) grows as speed increases and ICTs become more powerful. The wider social world takes on an opaque facade; it appears as too complex and difficult, and we respond with an apathy or cynicism that camouflages our lack of knowledge.

In respect of the mobile phone’s role in this general effect of networked neo-liberalism, some effects are starting to be measured. For example, The Times reported on a study carried out by University of London psychologists on people who constantly use their phone for texting and email. It found that:

[A] noticeable drop in IQ is attributed to the constant distraction of ‘always on’ technology when employees should be concentrating on what they are paid to do. ‘Infomania’ means that they lose concentration as their minds remain fixed in an almost permanent state of readiness to react to technology instead of focusing on the task in hand (Horsnell 2005).
This seems to support what I have elsewhere theorised as ‘abbreviated thinking’ (Hassam 2001, 2003b). The research does not postulate anything as empirical as a ‘drop in IQ’. It suggests more an anxious state of ‘readiness’ vis-à-vis ICTs that induces a negative relationship to time. We become ‘time-squeezed’, experiencing a time pressure that does not allow us to reflect adequately upon not only the ‘task in hand’ as The Times report puts it, but upon deeper and more significant social, cultural and economic dynamics that flow underneath the thin crust of space-time compression. Such cognitive and philosophical alienation is, I believe, the single most important effect of speed-inducing and space-time-shrinking technologies such as the mobile phone.

A powerful irony emerges from this general theorisation of what has been termed the ‘knowledge society’. As we are further detached from sources of critical and reflective knowledge in our compulsive pursuit of the instrumental knowledge that synchronises more readily with the imperatives of neo-liberal globalisation, the less we become aware of the existence of other forms of knowledge, other ways of being and seeing. Already, for many people, alternatives to neo-liberalism are quite literally unthinkable in the context of no obvious and serious political and social alternatives such as a global social democracy. This vacuum goes some way to understanding why in the last couple of decades the status of academic intellectuals (in politics, theory, philosophy and so on) has fallen precipitously in the eyes of the general public. In the US they are derided as ‘liberals’, or ‘tenured radicals’ who spout incoherent nonsense that has no relevance to the real world (Frank 2001). The logic of this process, ultimately, leads to a kind of dementia whereby the less we are self-and-socially-reflective, the less aware we are of what has actually befallen us—as individuals and as a society.

Conclusion

It is of course possible (and vital) to counter the systemic technological determinism that is currently ascendant due to the domination of neo-liberal globalisation and the ICT revolution that makes it possible. The ‘social’, I believe, in agreement with the co-determination theorists, is indeed the ‘ultimate’ force. For some of these the question rests upon personal-political choices. David Shenk, for example, in his 1997 book Data Smog, exhorts the reader to ‘leave the pager and the cell-phone behind’ and ‘limit your e-mail’ (1997, p. 187). Thomas Hylland Eriksen in his Tyranny of the Moment makes similar suggestions: to respond to emails only on one day of the week, to turn off the mobile phone when commuting, to eschew voice-mail, and to have from 4.30 until 8.30 as non-interruptible family time (2001, pp. 156–7). These are laudable aims, but for most people they are, once more literally unthinkable, so immersed are we in the ‘tyranny of the moment’.
These are personal and political choices, but how do we get to the point of understanding where such choices are thinkable for the majority of people? As this article has tried to argue, it is ultimately a question of control over the pace, nature and direction of globalisation and the revolution in information technologies. This is personal and political, but the politics has to come from the level of the system. Neoliberalism has relinquished social control in favour of abstract market mechanisms and the ‘efficiencies’ of computerisation. A beginning would be to take the market and its role back under democratic control. Reflective analysis of the experience of the last 25 years of neoliberal globalisation suggests that market mechanisms and computerisation have their place as tools for social agency—but not as panaceas for all society’s problems. Until the question of political and social control becomes salient in the social and economic use of ICTs, then pivotal technologies such as the mobile phone will continue to liquidise time and space, and further sublimate our historically constructive relationship with them.

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