

Mobiles and the appropriation of place

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Mizuko Ito, who spent her childhood split between Japan and the US, is a cultural anthropologist interested in how digital media are changing relationships, identities, and communities. She worked on that at the Universities of Tokyo and Stanford and is presently researching at the University of Southern California's Annenberg Center for Communication. In her contribution she analyses how wireless tools are changing the experience of co-presence for Japanese youth.

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Mobile phones are transforming the experience of place and co-presence for a wireless generation of Japanese youth. In the past, physical co-presence generally defined who one was socially and interactionally accountable to at any given time, interrupted occasionally by a telephone call or a beeping pager. Now that mobile phones have become a norm for youths in Japan as elsewhere, distant others are always socially co-present, and place – where you locate yourself – has become a hybrid relation between physical and wirelessly co-present context. My research group at Keio University Shonan Fujisawa Campus has been conducting ethnographic research on mobile phone use, detailing how, when and where phones get used. We see mobile phones as "somewhere, someplace" technologies that are intimately tied to the experience of particular settings and places.

Ito's research group at Keio University - <http://cafe.sfc.keio.ac.jp>

The older generation is often baffled by the sight of teens gathered at a fast-food restaurant, gazing at their mobile phones rather than their friends. The assumption is that the virtual connection is detracting from the experience of the face-to-face encounter. What non-users often don't realize is that mobile phones have become devices for augmenting the experience and properties of physically co-located encounters rather than simply detracting from them. Teens use mobile phones to bring in the presence of other friends who were not able to make it to the physical gathering, or of accessing information that is relevant to that particular time and place. The boundaries of a particular physical gathering, or flesh meet, are becoming extended through the use of mobile technologies, before, during, and after the actual encounter.

Before: Prelude to Co-Presence

Mobile phones have revolutionized the experience of arranging meetings in urban space. In the past, landmarks and pre-arranged times were the points that coordinated action and convergence in urban space. People would decide on a particular place and time to meet, and converge at that time and place. I recall hours spent at landmarks such as Hachiko Square in Shibuya or Roppongi crossing, making occasional forays to a payphone to check for messages at home or at a

friend's home. Now teens and twenty-somethings generally do not set a fixed time and place for a meeting. Rather, they initially agree on a general time and place (Shibuya, Saturday late afternoon), and exchange approximately 5 to 15 messages that progressively narrow in on a precise time and place, two or more points eventually converging in a coordinated dance through the urban jungle. As the meeting time nears, contact via messaging and voice becomes more concentrated, eventually culminating in face-to-face contact.

One of our subjects described how she sends a quick message as she waits for the bus. "I'll be about thirty minutes late." Her friend responds with a quick acknowledgement. Upon arrival, our research subject sends another message announcing her arrival, and they quickly converge at the train station. As is typical in cases like this, lateness is a matter to be announced but not apologized for. The one being "kept waiting" has been attending to other matters about town rather than waiting at an appointed spot. The older generation often describes these practices as "loose" in terms of commitments to time and place, a slackening of manners. But we can actually see a consistency in certain social norms and expectations attached to "gathering". As with meetings with appointed time and place, with these more flexibly arranged gatherings, the consistent rule is that you should not keep somebody waiting in a particular place. If their partner has already "shown up" in virtual space by announcing where they are, mobile phone users can go off to a book store or take care of an errand rather than wait at an arbitrary spot.

During: Augmented Co-Presence

After young people have converged in physical space, mobile communication does not necessarily end. In contrast to work meetings in which mobile communications are largely excluded, among gatherings of young people, the mobile phone is a social accessory. They might call a friend, inviting them to join them, or getting information about the conversation at hand. When an email message comes into a friend's mobile, it is quite common to ask who it was from and a conversation about that person to ensue. Young people generally reported that they had no reservations about making contact with others via mobile phones when they were with a group of friends, though they might make a brief apology if a one-on-one gathering was interrupted with a voice call.

I find myself sitting on a bus with a group of high school boys, all cradling a mobile phone in their hand. They plan a future gathering together and debate who should be included. One of them sends a message to an absent friend. As they continue to debate whether the girls will be coming or not, a mobile phone receives a reply. "Yeah, he will be coming, and he thinks the girls will too."

In other cases, mobile messages are used to contact a recipient just out of visual range or unavailable for voice contact. Messaging during class or lectures gets around the limitations on private voice contact. "Hey, look. The teacher buttoned

his shirt wrong." "This class sucks." Another example from one of our informants was when she was standing in a long line for a bus and saw her friend near the front of the line. She sent her a message to look behind her so that she could see her and wave. In other cases, students have described how they will message their friends upon entering a large lecture hall to ask where they are sitting. In all of these cases, mobile email augments the properties of a particular place, enabling contact and communication that would not otherwise be available.

After: Extensions of Co-Presence

Just as mobile email extends the prior and present parameters of social contact, it also extends the possibilities for contact after a gathering. In most of the gatherings we saw between heavy mobile email users, a trail of messages were scattered after a physical gathering as people continued the conversation, mentioned a forgotten bit of information, or gave thanks to the person who organized the gathering. "I forgot to give you back your CD!" "Thanks for the lift." "Thanks for coming out with me today!" In the past, the common practice was to say "thanks for last time", on the next occasion of a phone call or a meeting. The new norm is that these exchanges happen as people scatter to return home on foot or public transport. The dead time in transit on the way home is now occupied by the fading embers of conversation and contact.

While all planned encounters have always had some element of prior contact (making a phone call to arrange a meeting, confirming by email, etc.) and post contact (saying thanks the next time you call or meet), the mobile phone makes the situation of "a gathering" extend more obviously beyond the parameters of a face-to-face encounter and interaction. Even as these practices challenge existing norms of propriety and place, they set up new manners and ways of being together. These are the new senses of place being constructed as a hybrid between co-located and remote social contact. Urban space has become highly personalized, no longer a site of anonymity. Young people are in social contact even when alone, coordinating a meeting with a friend, sharing information about a shopping conquest, a celebrity sighting, a photo of their entrée, or just killing time in a texting chat as they ride the train home. Even as the urban environment is being homogenized by the latest franchise influx, mobile phones become devices for customizing and personalizing even the most generic of urban places.

Multicultural Japan online - <http://www.chanpon.org>

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