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Rethinking the Terms of Social Interaction

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Work within the ethnography of communication research tradition has tended to privilege face-to-face contexts of interaction, whether it was conducted in traditional or modernized societies. The culturally situated study of interactional patterns thus constructs our understanding of communication processes on this basic face-to-face model. Given the much more expanded communicative environment we live in today, it seems to me that one of the lines of inquiry that is particularly intriguing at this juncture is the ethnographic study of technologically mediated contexts. The general question such study would promote concerns the extent to which the concepts used, the terms developed, and the insights gained for the analysis of social interaction in face-to-face encounters can apply to the study of technologically mediated ones. Such inquiry would foreground the role and shape of communication in a range of technologically mediated contexts of interaction, explore how they relate to contexts of face-to-face communication, and indicate what new formulations may be required in order to encompass them within our theoretical apparatus.

Whereas computer-mediated communication is probably the most notable technological development in the communication field, and its study has indeed spawned a good deal of research, in what follows I

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focus on two other examples of communication that is technologically mediated. Each of these cases, I argue, throws into relief some basic assumptions about communicative interaction as it has been traditionally studied in relation to face-to-face encounters and invites us to rethink some of the terms through which it is conceptualized.

The first example involves the introduction of cellular telephones into the fabric of everyday life and the way it has affected our sense of context, our sense of interactional accessibility, and, indeed, our very conception of what counts as social interaction. The second example has to do with the display of talk on such mass mediated forms as televised talk shows devoted to the discussion of personal and interpersonal matters, which provide a site for the renegotiation of the boundaries between the public and the private spheres and the ways of speaking commensurate with each. A consideration of these mediated forms of communication must take into account both the reorganization of interactional means and the meanings they carry in different cultural contexts. I attend to these examples one by one, situating them in the Israeli context—the one most familiar to me.

The proliferation of cellular telephones in Israel in recent years, and the patterns of talk engagement associated with them, have been so salient as to become the topic of routine commentary in everyday conversations and in journalistic accounts. The introduction of such a new technological medium, of course, raises questions about the way it gets used and the communicative functions it comes to serve. One such study that was performed in the United States, with an eye to gender differences in patterns of cellular phone use, concluded, “The cellular telephone, because it lies in that twilight area between public and private, seems to be an extension of the public world when used by men, an extension of the private world when used by women” (Rakow & Navarro, 1993, p. 155). The researchers also found that men view the availability of cellular phones to women as a form of protection, whereas women use them to conduct “family business” such as “remote-control mothering.” Notably, cellular phones are much less frequently used by women for sociability and long chats than are regular phones.

It seems to me that alongside studies exploring the overall social uses of such new technologies, we also need studies concerned with the ways in which they subtly affect basic interactional expectations and practices. Such studies would combine data derived from the observation

of naturally occurring interactions, self-reports by phone users (as in Rakow & Navarro, 1993), and attention to the details of interactional organization as well as consideration of interactants' goals. Taken together, these data sources and analytic moves can lead us to ask significant questions about the nature of cellular-phone exchanges as an interactional form that problematizes the spatial–contextual dimension of communication on the one hand, and sets new terms for expectations concerning accessibility to interaction on the other.

In addition to its role in facilitating instrumentally oriented communication, a central feature of cellular-phone communication is the role it plays in maintaining personal social networks with a high intensity of mediated contact across space. This, of course, has been the role of the telephone for many years, but the use of the cellular phone further de-spatializes communicative action—one does not call a person at a certain place but a person anywhere. Spatial parameters are either reestablished through a “Where are you?” question, usually between familiars, or are left out as irrelevant. The high level of accessibility of the cellular phone user means that he or she can be reached not only anywhere but also at any time, thereby foregrounding the temporal parameters of social interaction. Simultaneity is foregrounded at the expense of co-presence. What does this mean for our understanding of the way this communicational medium works?

Some everyday scenes associated with cellular-phone communication can provide a starting point for such a discussion: the sight of a couple sitting across from each other at a restaurant table, or walking side by side along the beach, each holding a cellular phone and talking to a distant interactional partner, yet at the same time clearly forming a “being together” (a *with* in the terminology of [Goffman, 1971, pp. 19–27](#)). This kind of interactional arrangement involves a realigning of contexts: The relational context becomes separated from and supersedes the situational one. Rather than engaging with or responding to his or her immediate environment, the cellular-phone user suspends its relevance to his or her communicative activities. However, as is indicated by the above examples of a couple who are in a sense sharing their separate calls, the notion of interactional relevance is not a straightforward one. In this case, rather than talking about separate interactions, we might talk about an “interactional field” that may encompass both focused interactions and secondary involvements of various kinds (including what Goffman, 1967, p. 113,

called *side involvements*). Developing the analytic details of such an interactional configuration and the application of this notion to actual cases seems to me a worthwhile research effort.¹

A person with a cellular phone can thus be envisaged as a relational node, whose accessibility and voice rather than actual presence and spatial contiguity embody the possibility of social connection. In fact, copresent, nonratified participants in the mediated interaction can become a source of interactional problem as they are made privy to personal, even intimate information shared on the cellular phone in public. Treated as nonpersons by the phone user, who is usually engrossed in the call, their task becomes one of dramatizing disattention and nonparticipation so as to cope with the spectatorship situation they are thrown into. This is another form of intrusion of the private into the public, in addition to the one mentioned by Rakow and Navarro (1993) when they spoke of women juggling domestic responsibilities in the public-work sphere through the ongoing use of the cellular phone.

The cultural warrant given to this form of disengagement from the immediate situational context stands out in particular when considered in relation to ethnographic studies of communication dealing with traditional societies, in which communication is indelibly and meticulously regulated in terms of the demands of copresence. Possibly, this shift from interaction grounded in a situational field to interaction grounded in a relational field is a response to what Rakow and Navarro (1993) described as “the problem of safety and security in a violent and mobile society” (p. 155). Both the cultural meanings and the interactional implications of this shift require (and seem to be worth) further study.

At the same time, one would want to understand more about the relational potential as well as constraints governing the use of cellular phones. Just as in the case of regular phones, but in an even more accentuated manner, one would want to specify and understand the social dimensions of this communicative format. For example, in rules of accessibility and inaccessibility—who calls whom, when, how many times, for what reason, and so on—When does hesitation step in?; Under what circumstances is one permitted/expected to disconnect one’s cellular phone?; How do cultural rules of speaking and situational factors come in or become suspended?; and so on. The differences noted by Rakow and Navarro (1993) concerning the uses made of cellular phones by men and women, and the ideologies of gender shaping them, suggest that despite the air of globalization that attends this (and other) technological

innovations, the ways they become implicated in people's lives may very well be subject to cultural coloration the nuances of which invite ethnographic exploration.

The second example of technologically mediated interaction, that of interpersonally oriented talk shows on television, can also lead us to new questions about mediated interactions. The questions that come up here are very different ones and highlight issues related to technologically mediated interactions in a different way. Talk shows are a mass-mediated interactional context in which talk is both the vehicle of, and, in a certain sense, the item on, public display. In many ways, talk shows are performances of self, which take a range of forms, including the telling of personal experience narratives ([Thornborrow, 1997](#)). Unlike the case of personal information flowing into the ears of persons overhearing others' cellular phone conversations in public spaces, as mentioned earlier, the self-presentations found in "therapeutic" talk shows are at least semideliberate performances, and are culturally legitimated as such. For viewers at home they provide a modeling of expressive and intimate talk. That the public display of such talk consistently attracts considerable television audiences is in itself an interesting cultural phenomenon, one that invites a cross-cultural approach to the study of comparable media genres. Notably, in Israel the kinds of "therapeutic" talk shows found on American television (like Phil Donahue, Oprah Winfrey, and others) have not taken root on local television despite the accessibility of the American shows through cable television (with Hebrew subtitles). Those that have explicitly tried to emulate the American genre have neither done so successfully nor withstood the test of time. In fact, the high level of self-disclosure on some of these shows has become a symbol of the "otherness" of American culture for many Israelis. At the same time, call-in, nighttime, "therapeutic" programs are on almost every night of the week on Israeli radio channels. What all this means in terms of the place of personal matters in relation to the public sphere remains to be explored.

Quite a bit has been written on talk shows as mass-mediated forms (e.g., [Livingstone & Lunt, 1994](#); [Mehl, 1996](#); [Peck, 1995](#); [Priest, 1995](#); [Shattuc, 1997](#); [White, 1992](#)) or as sites for the study of culturally coded ways of speaking (e.g., [Carbaugh, 1988](#)). It seems to me, however, that more can be said about the performative element involved in talk shows, with an eye to unpacking the multiple positionings held by participants in the talk show as a complex interactional field that encompasses a variety of face-to-face and mass-mediated interactions.

The multiple interactions that take place in this context involve interactions between hosts and guests; interactions among guests themselves; interactions involving hosts, guests, and studio audiences; and the mass-mediated interaction of talk show participants with absent audiences at home. This range of interactional formats throws into question the line between interaction and performance, and each case has to be specified in terms of participants' degree and kind of involvement, speaking rights, and so on. As contexts in which interpersonal talk is not only produced but also displayed, that is, as sites of enacted communicative reflexivity, talk shows are a particularly intriguing context for the study of interactional and performative codes and their interpenetration.

The presentation of personal problems and expressive talk in the televised public domain is thus another example of cultural play with the boundaries between the private and the public in contemporary life. The advent of personal utterance in a mass-mediated realm provides a setting for the emergence of new forms of "staged expressivity," which involve speech productions that straddle and renegotiate the public-private spheres.

As we see from these two examples, the study of technologically mediated communication, if approached from an ethnographic perspective, draws our attention to essentially old questions of interactional patterning in what may be radically new contexts of communication. A central issue to be explored are the implications of formulating our notion of interactional context in relational rather than in situational terms. In one way or another, this issue touches on the role assigned to the spatial-situational dimension of communication, to the question of interactional accessibility, and to the ways in which the lines between the private and the public spheres are renegotiated. Most significantly, perhaps, the study of technologically mediated interactions invites us to reconsider the place we have come to assign to unmediated face-to-face encounters in a world saturated with mediated ones, and ask anew what "being with," "being in touch," or "being there" may mean.

NOTE

- 1 Among Goffman's books, the one most relevant to the concerns raised in this article seems to me to be his 1963 exploration of behavior in public places.

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