

Finding a home for the 'digital nomad'

**New forms of identity and work in relation
to mobile media and public space**

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Introduction

Increased use of mobile media devices in public spaces has disrupted social 'flow' by dramatically revising behaviours, rituals and communications patterns. As these 'techno-spaces' evolve, the line also blurs between mobile media use for work and recreation, leading to an increase of 'digital nomads' claiming public spaces for mobile media-based work purposes. This jeopardises society's 'third place', the sacred space separate from home and work, and the evolution of the café is used to illustrate this – from social space, to Internet café, to Wifi café, to work space.

By analysing new forms of identity and work in relation to mobile media and public space, a gap is revealed in our social structure for acceptable public consumption of work-based mobile media. This essay argues that the co-working space fills this gap by offering a physical manifestation of the 'techno space' that facilitates greater public engagement and social interaction, while also allowing reclamation of the sacred 'third space' by decreasing the need for laptop use in public spaces like cafés. Using my experiences in a Berlin co-working space as a case study, I present them as productive spheres of work, informal interaction, community, social support, collaboration, inspiration and innovation, all based around work-based mobile media consumption.

Does co-working represent a wider trend in the acceptance of new work and personal identity structures and the re-negotiation of mobile media use in public spaces? Do co-working spaces offer a new home for the 'digital nomad'? Will the rise in co-working lead to a decline of work-related mobile media use in 'the third space'? This essay explores these key questions.

Definition of key terms

'ICT' stands for information and communications technology, referring to the integration of telecommunications, computers, broadcast media processing and transmission (Foldoc, 2012). 'Mobile media' are portable media (including laptops, tablet computers, mobile telephones) connectable to movements of data, either pre-downloaded to devices or accessed instantaneously by the Internet (Mackenzie 2005). 'Smart devices' are forms of mobile media with built-in Wifi connections. 'Wifi' is a wireless technology permitting the transfer of information between separated points without physical connection (Mackenzie, 2005), the most common being high-

speed Internet. 'Internet cafés' are places that provide Internet access, usually on time-based computer rental rates in café-like facilities. A 'Wifi café' is a café with Wifi connection, often free of charge to customers. 'Co-working' involves independent, computer-based work in shared working environments where co-workers rent out desk space. A co-working space usually comprises office facilities, in a relaxed café-type environment.

Context, ICT diffusion and the telephone

The introduction of major new ICTs prompts social re-definition and re-negotiation of relationships between time and space, as well as public and private, causing dramatic revisions of behaviours, rituals and communications patterns. Social adaptation of ICTs moves from the invention phase, to institutionalisation, to diffusion, with the diffusion stage progressing from innovators, to early adopters (arguably younger, better educated and higher earning), to early then late majority, to lingerers (Stoeber, 2004). Behavioural studies of today's early-adopting 'digital nomads' and their uses of mobile media therefore offer insight into growing trends in wider society, a point that will be returned to later in the essay.

Winner states that technologies are inherently neutral (1985, quoted in MacKenzie & Wajcman 1999), yet this view can be seen as somewhat naive. ICTs cannot be viewed as separate from society but instead as products made of society's very fabric: "constructed complexes of habits, beliefs and procedures embedded in elaborate cultural codes of communication" (Marvin, 1988:7). ICTs influence society well beyond their technological and rational functions, becoming symbols and "totems of today's techno-tribes" (Morley, 2007: 297).

Some ICTs disrupt social 'flow' more than others, dramatically revising behaviours and rituals. The diffusion of the telephone early-to-mid 20th Century provides such an example since this technology dislocated and disembodied users from traditional understandings of time, place and distance. When mobile telephones were introduced late 20th Century, they achieved global diffusion faster than any previous ICT in history, 'plugging in' to networks of other media with immense social and cultural impact. Mobile phones, a new form of communication 'on the move', caused a controversial redefinition of relationships between public and private and the intimacy of inter-personal relationships (Green & Haddon, 2009). These transformations laid foundations for the concept of 'absent presence' that arrived with

the Internet and 'smart' (Wifi compatible) ICTs. The telephone demonstrates social tension as a common symptom of widespread diffusion of ICTs, a phenomenon experienced today regarding the social effects of mobile media use in public spaces.

'Techno-spaces' and the controversy of mobile media use in public space

Whilst humans have long erected 'media walls' around them with newspapers, books or music, mobile media provides more complex and personalised 'techno-spaces' – containers of discrete, connected virtual worlds (Sofia, 2000 quoted by Richardson, 2005). Theorists argue that use of mobile media in public spaces brings the socially adverse phenomenon of an 'absent presence' with one being "physically present but absorbed by a technologically mediated world of elsewhere" (Gergen, 2002: 227). For example, Simmel (1997) argues that public social life becomes an experience of fragmented and disconnected discontinuity (quoted by Green 2002) and Bugeja (2005) speaks of a 'social void', eroding our sense of community, shifting interaction inward and making us displaced and increasingly isolated through control of exposure and connection 'on demand'. Kroker takes an alarmist approach claiming that many of our activities are now "so utterly possessed by technology that the distinction between virtual activities and actual activities borders on incomprehensible" (quoted in Armitage 1999:3).

Despite these social drawbacks of 'techno-spaces', mobile media are essentially tools and currency of a network society, with social preference for them increasing. I am critical of neo-liberal discourse condemning mobile media use as a slippery slope from corporeality for virtuality, instead finding the realm of the techno-space interesting and complex. Techno-spaces continually evolve with communication and behavioural patterns and rituals, being constantly redefined and renegotiated. I agree with Cosgrove's argument that a society networked through mobile media "is not disconnected, abstract, inhuman; it is bound in the places and times of actual lives, into human existences that are as connected, sensuous and personal as they ever have been" (1996:1495, quoted by Graham 2004:22). So what impact will techno-spaces have on our existence within realms where technology meets human practice and the physical meets the digital? Castells believes it is too early to tell: "Moving physically while keeping the networking connection to everything we do is a new realm of the human adventure, on which we know little" (2004: 87). The answer before us, and whilst techno-spaces continue to disturb notions of time and space,

widespread alarm-ism is unhelpful, and better redirected to examine the consequences opportunities and potential benefits for individuals and societies.

'The third place': from café, to Internet café, to Wifi café

As 'techno-spaces' evolve, so do work practices and routines, and the line blurs between mobile media use for business and recreation. Critics believe this jeopardises society's 'third place' – the space separate from home and work for spontaneous public interactions, social companionship and engagement with community in non-work contexts (Oldenberg 1999 & Maslow 1943). I use the example of the café – tracking its transition from social space, to Internet café, to Wifi café, to 'work space' – to show this evolution.

The café has epitomised the 'third place' since the mid 19th Century in Paris, a symbol of social institution and modern life. A new 'third place' arose mid 1990s, with the popular explosion of 'techno-social spaces' such as Internet cafés – dedicated social spaces for technology use combined with café dynamics. Over the past decade, increased mobile media use with smart devices has decreased demand for Internet cafés, yet it has not eradicated the need for 'space' for mobile media consumption all together. One of the consequences has been a reversion to technology use in conventional cafés that now often boast the additional facility of Wifi. In urban environments today, many cafés offer Wifi, and in areas of Berlin such as Kreuzberg or Mitte, cafés without are now in the minority. Subsequent rise of laptop use in these cafés has caused shifts in behavioural patterns within traditional café environments. Critics argue that the rise of individuals focused on their private mobile media 'ruins the atmosphere' of public spaces such as these, changing the lively social dynamic to an office-like environment that discourages conversation, and turning the 'third place' into a 'second place' of work, further diminishing the spaces where one is able to "productively encounter the stranger" (Hartmann, 2009: 425, Fleishman, 2005).

Berlin cafés are attempting to counter this trend by implementing regulations such as turning off Wifi at busy times, charging password fees or limiting laptops to communal tables. This invites questioning whether Wifi use in public spaces facilitates a new type of public sphere, or reinforces the trend towards 'public privatism' that benefits only existing ties (Wellman et al., 2003; Hampton & Gupta, 2008). Both outcomes are possible simultaneously, as is occurring presently. We live

in the midst of rising, unprecedented levels of techno-social engagement, and should not assume only adverse outcomes, or view this complex social phenomenon with alarm-ism, but instead seek the social reasons for this increase of work-based mobile media in public spaces.

New forms of identity and work in relation to mobile media and public space

As technology and culture evolve and the influence of 'techno-spaces' in society grows, so do personal identities and lifestyles, including the ways we negotiate the meaning of work in our lives. Gluesing expands as follows: *"these new, virtual workspaces can open up new conceptualisations of personal identity... If we think of identity as multiple, as open to possibility, and as flexibly responsive to multiple cultures and contexts, we can alter our ideas about work and its relationship to our lives in ways that more closely align with today's hybridised, dematerialised and decontextualised world"* (2008: 84). Gluesing documents the transition of our identification with work over the past four decades as evolving from a time where geography, workplace and lifestyle were inextricably linked, boundaries clear, roles defined, and identity tied to organisation and physical space, to today with increased travel, new virtual communication technologies vital to increasingly global lifestyles, and identity becoming a flexible process based on relationships facilitated by virtual technologies (2008). The 'spatial' element of this work/identity transformation has evolved more slowly, creeping away from the conventional office space, yet the need for physical work locations still exists, albeit in more mobile and flexible forms.

Jenkins links this phenomenon to a growing 'convergence culture' where production and consumption, economics and culture, converge (2006, quoted in Deuze 2009), and we are now witnessing a rise of immaterial and individualised labour, and the commoditisation of activities traditionally viewed as 'social skills' or 'citizen journalism'. Corporations rely more on freelance entrepreneurs on as-needed bases, with young professionals crafting businesses in what Zaino refers to as a 'project economy' (as quoted in Lesonsky 2011). Terms such as 'digital nomad', 'digital bohème' or 'creative class' are used to describe this workforce, but they tend to give negative connotations such as threatening mainstream working culture. In reality, while the 'creative class' is growing, their presence is comparatively minute. In Berlin, a city that attracts the 'digital bohème' due to its creative scene and cheap living costs, this group is also referred to as 'urban bums' of a 'precariat class', named for the precarious financial situation many of them are in (Hartmann 2009). Whilst

apparently a 'lifestyle' choice – of freedom over security and independence over regular income – Hartmann stresses that the negative aspects make it less of a 'lifestyle' and more of a 'workstyle', with often unrealistic expectations that self-fulfillment and personal expression will also occur within the work environment. In our convergence culture, there remains a surprising lack of public acceptance and insufficient social facilities aligned with today's lived mobile work and life experiences. Analysis of new forms of identity and work in relation to mobile media and public space reveals gaps in social structures for acceptable public consumption of (increasingly work-based) mobile media. This effectively makes the digital nomad homeless. Hartmann calls for "a new kind of interaction sphere where the border between work/free time, public/private is further challenged (2009: 432), and an example of this sphere is the emerging form of co-working.

Gallaga describes co-working as the "mingling of a techie-friendly coffee shop with functionality of rented office space" (2008:1), Fost as "connected somewhere between the communalism of the 1960s and the whimsy of the dot-com days of the '90s" (2008:1), and Wagner as a "socio-cultural and economical environment for cognitive-cultural enterprises and freelancers" (2011:1). Co-working is a growing phenomenon, with around 35 registered spaces in Berlin (coworking.de, 2012), many more unregistered and new spaces opening monthly. Betahaus, one of Berlin's original co-working spaces, offers *"flexible working space in a collaborative work environment. Many Betahaus users do freelance work but are fed up with sitting at home alone and working on their project in isolation. Others are looking for synergies in order to be able to master bigger projects"* (Betahaus, 2012). Co-working spaces are productive spheres of work, environments of informal interaction, community, social support, collaboration, inspiration and innovation, all based around work-based mobile media consumption.

For this case study I spent 20 days between February and May 2012 working from a Berlin co-working space at *Wostel* (the name a hybrid of the words 'work' and 'hostel') in the Reuterkiez of Neukölln, an area with high populations of creative professionals, artists and expatriates. The space was established by two French women in 2010 who describe it as *"more than a co-working space. The design and equipment are originals, with furniture and accessories from 1930s-60s. This creates more than a cold office atmosphere, but a comfortable and timeless vintage ambience"* (Wostel, 2012). Through informal conversations with other co-workers and observations of a board of co-worker profiles, it emerged that most worked in the

IT industry, with others being technology-based entrepreneurs, architects, designers, academics and multi-media artists. The majority were casually dressed males from mid 20s - late 30s, relaxed, and friendly. This fits with Pellegrin & Foertsch's claim that the average co-worker is young, male with an academic background and middle to high income, project oriented and highly flexible" (2011, quoted in Wagner 2011). Around 60% were German, the rest British, American, Spanish, Japanese and French, showing the international nature of such spaces. Interestingly, most of the co-workers worked 'conventional' office hours in the space (9/10am - 6pm, Monday to Friday), giving themselves a 45min (approx.) lunch break, a possible residual habit from conventional office days.

While official networking opportunities were limited, co-workers greeted each other and a kitchen doubled as a space for informal conversations where it was common for co-workers to ask general questions of others, often regarding work. It was natural to be on first name basis, chatting to co-workers as in a relaxed office, rather than as passers-by frequenting the same café. This illustrates the beneficial community nature of co-working spaces compared to other public spaces.

Use of mobile media in the space included laptops, mobile phones and MP3 players. When a mobile phone rang, the call was usually taken outside. If loud calls or noisy conversations occurred in the workspace, admonishing glances signaled that this behaviour was unacceptable. Many co-workers used headphones to listen to music, and occasional 'sound leaks' also led to disapproving looks, although I did not experience any confrontations. One day *Wostel's* Wifi cut out, and within seconds co-workers glanced around, inquiring in a concerned tone if others still had Internet. Once the modem was reset and Wifi restored, there was common relief expressed with sighs and chuckles, as if 'crisis had been averted'. Indeed, Wifi is the lifeline of these co-workers and the main artery of a co-working space.

I experienced only a couple of social tensions in the space. One was some anti-gentrification graffiti that appeared on the *Wostel* shop-front overnight: "Häuser sind zum Wohnen!" (Houses are for living in!). The graffiti sparked debate amongst co-workers about whether they, as members of the community, were to blame for this gentrification and what positive action they could take. The other was an abrupt sign regarding illegal use of *Wostel's* Wifi. "Due to recent events, anyone caught downloading illegal files will be banned from *Wostel*". The owner explained that another Berlin co-working space had been fined for illegal downloads and the sign

was precautionary. Being such a new phenomenon, such 'teething problems' are to be expected for co-working spaces, and possible solutions include community initiatives and increased Wifi security protocols.

Overall, I experienced an atmosphere of friendliness, tolerance and openness. There was a high level of trust with co-workers leaving their mobile media devices (including laptops) unattended during lunch breaks, a higher level than experienced in a large office or café. There existed a feeling of camaraderie between the co-workers, as if the commonalities of their work status were communally acknowledged. I believe this space was well suited in design and practice to the work patterns, behaviours and routines of Berlin's freelance community, and a beneficial new spacial development for work-based mobile media consumption.

One could ask if co-working spaces are essentially corporate ventures and profit-driven business manifestation of a contemporary capitalist system. After my personal experiences of the communities they create and support however, I do not believe this to be the case. Many co-working spaces in Berlin are 'next-to-no profit', the space run not for a profit but to foster a community. Many co-working space managers earn their income from other sources, jobs they complete sitting alongside their co-workers. The co-working trend facilitates greater public engagement and social interactions, simultaneously allowing reclamation of the sacred 'third space' by finding a new home for 'digital nomads' and decreasing need for work-based mobile media use in other public spaces including cafés.

Conclusion

As mobile media continues to evolve and an increasing number of 'digital nomads' move away from conventional office environments, more resources are needed to define, structure and resource their physical 'techno spaces'. Co-working spaces can be seen to represent a wider trend in the re-negotiation of mobile media use in public spaces and acceptance of new work and identity structures, a trend that would subsequently lead to a declining need for work-related mobile media use in 'the third space'.

These issues are multi-tiered, complex and constantly evolving, so as new work identities develop and the use of work-based mobile media continues to rise in public spaces, more research is needed on the social behaviours, routines and needs of these media users. As Hampton & Gupta (2008:847) write, "*observations of spaces*

such as co-working enterprises will help us to understand how the built environment can be used to help mobile media users such as those in the creative class, balance privacy, mutual surveillance, public safety, the opportunity for serendipitous encounters and other social behaviors".

Research must move beyond generalised and technological deterministic discourses on the impacts of mobile media on public space, to examine the complex ways in which these technologies are being utilised in order to offer the highest benefits for 'digital nomads' and society at large. The increasing use of mobile media in public spaces will inevitably grow and continue to re-construct and challenge our perceptions of work, identity and public and private spheres. How we deal with these challenges will determine how they impact on our communities.

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