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The New Meaning of Mobility

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What is "mobility" and what is it for? The word has commonly been used to describe upward movement on the socioeconomic scale, the sort of classic American success story of which fiction and real life have given us countless examples. This figurative meaning is related to the more literal sense of mobility as freedom for movement across physical space—which itself has an iconic role in the American tale, from the explorers through the pioneers and the Beats. Americans understood the two meanings of *mobility* as of a piece: moving out and moving up, both a means of striking out for new prospects. It was liberation, pursued in the spirit of self-reliance, exploration, and reinvention.

Today, when we speak of being "mobile," we refer to the myriad technologies that allow us to remain in constant contact with each other regardless of where we are. This kind of mobility isn't like that of immigrants struggling to break out of poverty, or of the pioneers heading west.

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That kind was engaged with places: escaping the confines of the old place, searching for opportunities in the new. For today's mobile citizens, place matters very little; it is an obstacle that technology painlessly overcomes, with our ever-present smartphones telling us always where we are, what's around us, and, thanks to GPS, how to get where we are going.

The cutting edge of mobility is "location awareness": smartphone content that automatically responds and reacts to your physical location. For instance, websites like Yelp allow you to see nearby restaurants and businesses. And Twitter, Facebook, and other social networking sites allow you to "geotag" your updates, so that friends and followers will know precisely where you are. Panasonic makes a camera with a built-in GPS that can automatically geotag every photograph you take, allowing picture-sharing sites to show where the photo was taken.

Although we rarely pause to consider whether this kind of mobility is good, we are beginning to see what it means for those who hope to profit from our use of it. AT&T recently unveiled ShopAlerts, a "geo-fencing" service: as the *New York Times* Media Decoder blog reported, "marketers can create a geo-fence around an event, like a concert, a retail location or a geographic area," and when a person with a smartphone steps into the geofenced area, he is bombarded with offers of products to buy. This is but one example of how mobility has begun to deepen the commercialization of public space, moving it from mere ads and billboards to a point where every individual sojourn into public space becomes an opportunity for targeted commercial exploitation. In this sense, the digitization of public space seems to be following the path that the Internet took two decades ago, moving rapidly away from its initial status as a freewheeling, unencumbered realm and turning it into something that more closely resembles a shopping mall.

Consider an interview Eric Schmidt gave to the *Wall Street Journal* in August 2010 when he was still CEO of Google, in which he stated rather matter-of-factly, "We know roughly who you are, roughly what you care about, roughly who your friends are." This is true for millions of users of GPS-enabled smartphones—and, as users of Apple's iPhone and Google's Android discovered this spring, data on their locations and movements are stored and transmitted back to the parent companies, meaning that they know too *where* you are, and where you were.

Why do Google and Apple want to know where you are and where you've been? So that one day in the near future, when you are walking

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home from work, Google can remind you to get milk and urge you to stop into a nearby store to buy it. Schmidt foresees, in the *Journal* author's paraphrasing, that "a generation of powerful handheld devices is just around the corner that will be adept at surprising you with information that you didn't know you wanted to know." Schmidt calls this "serendipity," and promises that it "can be calculated now. We can actually produce it electronically."

How desirable, really, is this "electronic serendipity"? It is no small historical irony that the technology that is meant to liberate us from place also allows such ubiquitous location tracking: You can go anywhere, but you can also be found anywhere. The possibility encapsulated in the old form of mobility—the freedom to escape one's past, the chance to start anew—is undermined by the technologies of the new mobility, which make it increasingly difficult for us, even from moment to moment in far-off places, to be free from society, from each other, and from ourselves.

Curiously, although we are ever more inextricably linked together in this way, human ties are not necessarily strengthening as a result. As many sociologists have documented, we frequently find ourselves "alone together," whether we are immersed in our individual cell-phone conversations in public or updating our Facebook pages at home while our family members engage in their own electronic entertainments. We are now available for communication with practically anyone at any time, yet large numbers of Americans report feelings of loneliness, fewer families sit down together to share meals, and the number of Americans living alone is the highest it has ever been. We have more hours of leisure time than any previous generation, and yet we spend most of them watching television. And while we are "connected" to large numbers of people via social networking, studies show we have fewer close friends than did previous generations.

As Sherry Turkle puts it in her new book, which takes *Alone Together* as its title, "we expect more from technology and less from each other." Perhaps we are justified in sensing something paradoxical at work in the progress of our technologies of mobility: their promise—to connect us to people and places—is belied by the reality that our connections to people and places seem only to be weakening.

Mobile But Tethered

To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul," Simone Weil argued in the mid-twentieth century. Even our virtual playgrounds pay homage to the deeply felt need for

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place: MySpace was, until recently, called "a place for friends"; Second Life mimics real-life places with its homes, offices, and restaurants. What is different about mobile playgrounds is that mobile devices force real life and virtual life (and real places and virtual places) to try to coexist in a way they never have before.

We want to see this as a good, enabling thing—I can fire off that e-mail to the office and then get back to relaxing on my vacation!—but it is instructive to go to a playground today: even on a weekend, you will see parents engrossed in their iPhones and BlackBerrys while their children make increasingly loud bids for their attention. The November 2, 2009 cover of *The New Yorker* sadly and beautifully satirized this trend: it shows an illustration of children out trick-or-treating, basked in the glow of houselights, while their parents bask in the glow of the smartphones in which *they* are rapt. Even our leisure time, it seems, has been colonized by our need to stay connected—and it is a constant struggle to set limits on our engagement with the virtual world so that we can attend to the real one in front of us.

And when we decide to leave home entirely, we find it difficult to leave the demands of work behind. Consider the cruise ship industry: every year, more than three million people board a Carnival Cruise ship to take a vacation. They spend a great deal of time eating—and gambling—and then eating some more. The perpetual buffets that have long been a staple of the cruise ship lifestyle cater to one kind of hunger; Carnival now caters to another—one that seems counterintuitive in vacationers eager to get away from it all: staying connected. With their twenty-four-hour Internet cafés, onboard WiFi, and an advertising campaign that features bikini-clad patrons lounging on deck chairs with laptop computers, Carnival Cruise Lines has enthusiastically responded to the demands of patrons who seek an ideal of maritime escape but still want to check their e-mail several times a day.

This, too, is the strange new world of leisure: never disconnected, and never really free from the demands of daily life. Notwithstanding all the talk of mobility, we find ourselves tethered in novel ways—not to a hometown, or to a particular social background, but to our devices themselves and the feeling of connection they provide, which we seemingly cannot sit still without.

This kind of ubiquitous connection transforms our sense of place. First, it brings the Outside in: it eliminates the boundary between work life and home life, and in the process disrupts many of the rituals of private life. Family members constantly checking in and out of virtual worlds

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exist in a state that has been dubbed "continuous partial attention," which is hardly conducive to healthy family life. Neither is this erosion between work and home life at all like the days when the two were merged, with children tending to the family farm and family members producing goods out of home-based workshops, for this new shift does not bring with it the binding up of family members together in some shared activity or practice. Quite the opposite: what family members do around each other at home has less and less to do with each other.

Our new mobility also brings the Inside out by transforming public space. Every public space is now potentially a scene for the private if we can reach out to those we know via technology. The oft-told tales of being forced to listen to someone else's cell-phone conversation are but one example. More broadly, our new mobility brings the Inside out in the sense that we bring our personal connections with us wherever we go. We can talk to our neighbor when we're on the other side of the world, and update our Facebook page while climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro. This connectivity comes with a cost: the joy of being away from familiar places and discovering new ones unencumbered, the freedom of *dis*connection.

A related consequence of our increasing mobility is the homogenization of experience. We take our devices with us wherever we go, staying connected to our social networks and tapping into the same sources of news and entertainment that we would access at home. Even when visiting remote or exotic locales, we now need never go without the social chit-chat, political commentary, celebrity gossip, sports scores, and jokes that fill our everyday conversations. In the twentieth century, industrialization and mass culture, for all their blessings, greatly eroded local flavor and the particular character of places. Now, the 24/7 hum of electronic communication is having a similar effect, making our experience of every place like every other.

Mobility also continues to erode social institutions. As one writer for the Carnegie Council put it in summarizing the findings of a German research project, "Increased mobility goes hand in hand with increased economic uncertainty, especially among young professionals," which has led to delays in marriage and childrearing. "Not only are young people less economically able to start a family, but they also change locations more often than ever with the fluidity of labor markets. Spouses or couples are less likely to find appropriate work in the same place." What was at first the *freedom* that mobility newly granted us to move about is increasingly becoming an economic *necessity*.

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Seen in this light, mobility is less appealing. When mobility becomes transience, ennui often follows. In Keith Gessen's 2008 novel *All the Sad Young Literary Men*, one character remarks, "If you walked around America and looked properly, what you saw was a group of wandering disaggregated people, torn apart and carrying with them, in their hands, like supplicants, the pieces of flesh they'd won from others in their time." They are probably also carrying their iPhones, thinking them a relief.

Losing Our Place

Perhaps it is time to reconsider "location awareness." Nearly forty million Americans change residences each year; our daily commutes to work are getting longer and longer. A genuine awareness of location or place might lead us to rethink mobility, to recognize that much of the ritual and happenstance of daily life—from the family meal to a passing conversation with a stranger on the bus—is necessarily tied to place. We outsource location awareness to mobile technology and exercise too little of it ourselves.

In a recent symposium about the Internet, architect Galia Solomonoff noted the way "our sense of orientation, space, and place has changed" because of the connectedness and mobility made possible by our new technologies. But she cautions: "The Internet at this point privileges what we can see and read over many other aspects of knowledge and sensation, such as how much something weighs, how it feels, how stable it is." And she wonders whether we are better able to navigate places now than we were before the advent of location awareness technology: "Do we have longer, better sojourns in faraway places or constant placelessness? How have image, space, place, and content been altered to give us a sense of here and now?"

These are good questions to grapple with as we think about the future of mobility and membership in particular communities. Serendipity is not, *contra* Google's former CEO, something we can engineer; it is the ability to find something valuable when we are not even seeking it. Mobile technologies promise us access to just such a world whose vast riches we can explore, but in practice, Internet serendipity has come to resemble targeted advertising rather than exciting unexplored horizons.

The more fundamental question is whether, in inhabiting these virtual worlds, we lose sight of the importance of the real one—and our deeply felt human need for place, for community, and for the unpredictable pleasures of face-to-face interaction. Just as architects and urban planners can design buildings and city centers that encourage rather than discourage

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community, so technological designers and individual users can construct boundaries that make use of our tools without undermining the good life we originally devised them to better.

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