

MSP 4541

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Final Project Paper

The Use of Mobile Video to Bridge Disconnection Practices and the Connectivity of Cataloguing

Mobile video carries with it a lot of framing and assumptions, from posting and livestreaming (Rein, Venturini, 2018; Omar, Dequan, 2020) on social media to the authenticity of news reports and citizens journalism (Berry, 2017). Mobile social networks similarly create space for discussing and studying social interactions, including questions of increased connectivity (Ling, 2014), uses of websites to manage communications and connections with others (Humphreys, 2012), and the way in which people address the need to end communications in the context of constant availability (Mannell, 2019). In this paper I am using the final version of my video project "home a-way" to explore the ways in which mobile video can be a bridge between disconnection/boundary-setting and adopting technology for human communication needs.

"home a-way" is a diary-like video filmed on a mobile phone, following a short trip from center city Philadelphia to Chestnut Hill East station by regional rail, ending with a trip back and an Instagram post. The title, "home a-way", references

the lines in the Instagram post, "I found a place that feels like home away from home", while also playing with words and how they might sound like "a way home" if moved around. The project's focus is split between three main points: the train experience, capturing various nature scenes, and the person filming spontaneously on-the-spot. It was filmed entirely on an iPhone 13, using both the frontal and the main camera. While filming, I had turned off all notifications and was wearing earphones and listening to an instrumental track (Sorg Uten Tarer's "A Spring Yearning") on repeat, similar to the one featured in the video. The experience of the light-hearted music full of emotional tones guided the filming process and mood. Due to copyright concerns, Gillicuddy's "Springish" (CC-BY-NC 3.0) was chosen to replicate that feeling for the viewer and match the video with the sound I heard during the filming process.

In the final version of the project, the editing was improved upon by timing cuts better to the tempo of the background music. The fact that I had turned off notifications during filming (and as a part of the narrative) is now reflected in a screencaptured message at the beginning of the video and frames the following nature scenes in a slightly different way, better highlighting the disconnection aspect. Some aspects of the walking experience were cut down to be more succinct and dynamic. Holding the acorns scene was shortened, the light reflection tuned up

to fit the music better, shots of the road progressing cut down to be equal in length and shorter overall. Instead, two more scenes were added: capturing the flowers growing along the road and a bush of berries. Sound transitions were made smoother.

Concept-wise, "home a-way" was conceptualized primarily as a response to Ling (2014). Ling wrote "...there was a certain anonymity or solitude that <people> enjoyed by not having a mobile phone" (p. 34) in their piece on mobile communication. In that piece, Ling (2014) explored the historical backdrop against which the mobile phone was introduced after the Second World War into a car-driven society with growing suburbs and growing needs for coordination. Ling's point about the necessity of coordination and constant availability through the mobile phone did not paint mobile technologies in a negative light. Instead, Ling (2014) showed patterns and reasons of why society had a pronounced need for mobile phones post the Second World War. Nevertheless, the comment on the solitude and anonymity stayed with me, highlighting what was the downside of adopting mobile phones as a major part of our lives.

This tied in with Humphreys' (2012) theory on outer space, inner space, and meta space factors in mobile media usage. Ling's (2014) discussion of the coordination aspect and need covered by mobile technologies corresponds with

Humphreys' (2012) category of "outer space" (pp. 503-504), managing the "outer", physical coordination, location, meeting times. The short comment on solitude and anonymity in Ling's text can be connected to the inner space and processes of communication (Humphreys, 2012), which refer to "managing one's social distance with others" (pp. 502-503). Humphreys pointed out that social interaction through mobile networks could and can often serve as a means of building and strengthening social relations (p. 502), potentially taking away from the anonymity and solitude desired by some. While mobile social networks can connect people of different social distances, they seem to all be focused on connecting rather than disconnecting (Humphreys, 2012, p. 503). I found this to be an open space to consider whether mobile social networks could be used to increase social distance or even disconnect from others.

Practices of disconnecting have been researched for some time now and even formed into a typology by Kate Mannell (2019, pp. 81-86): disentanglement, jamming, modulation, delay, suggestiveness. They range from actions regarding the mobile device and connection method itself to more particular app-based or linguistic actions. Within this paper and the "home a-way" project I primarily focus on actions that can be taken within the social media itself to increase social distance with a person or group of people, utilizing practices of modulation and

delay (Mannell, 2019). As an example, when the majority of people in your social circle including yourself already use a particular online social network, your ways of distancing from them may include posting less, moderating the type of content you post, locking posts for a select number of very close people; disconnecting may be done through doing a "social media detox", deleting your account entirely, or turning your notifications off. These actions make you less available (through your own agency) and simultaneously less convenient, as noted by Ling (2014) in citing Katz's, "You become a problem to me if you don't have your mobile phone" (p. 38), but they allow us to explore our boundaries and how we set them up while using mobile media.

One of such ways of distancing yourself from within the social media can be using media for cataloguing and archiving practices (meta space-related practices, according to Humphreys). To be clear, they do not inherently serve that role of increasing distance. A study of Tiktok users (Omar, Dequan, 2020) found that archiving was one of the significant motives that predicted Tiktok usage, including not only production, but also consumption and participation, which would seem to potentially bring users closer to each other. "home a-way" presents a different take on the practice of archiving through mobile media by bridging the practice of archiving and the concept of digital disconnection, and also bending the meaning of

"disconnection" to include the emotional/"inner space" (Humphreys, 2012). I will describe crucial elements of the project before taking them apart to illustrate the argument.

"home a-way" does not depict any people except the cameraperson and random passersby. The cameraperson appears in the shot when it is dictated by the filming process rather than when would be good for storytelling ("home a-way" may be read as a story but is not one in the traditional sense). A lot of the shots focus on the train movement, the road, and details of nature that attract the attention of the cameraperson. Movement is linear (point A to point B), but the filming does not reflect a particular purpose. The "thumbs up" gesture emerges as a cheeky reference to a class discussion about emoji usage rather than a planned out repeated element. The cameraperson picks up an acorn and two colorful leaves, motivated by curiosity towards the world and a desire to document the joy of being in the moment and paying attention to nature. There are several shots featuring earphone wires as a part of the scene, one of them deliberately tracing the way from the berries that are being filmed to the person filming. Though sometimes in production recording technology getting in the shot is considered a mistake, in "home a-way" it is utilized on purpose. There is no attempt to purify the experience - the earphones and the phone are a part of the process; this is a trip

to the suburbs that focuses on solitude and joy away from others but it is not divorced from technology.

The video starts and ends with phone screencaptures. In the beginning, a small piece of the screen demonstrates the cameraperson sending a message to someone, "I'll turn notifications off for a few hours! Going some place nice" with a face surrounded by hearts emoji. At the end of the video, a photo of the acorn and the two colorful leaves placed together into a composition is being posted online as the cameraperson is taking a trip back on the train. Artificially, this, combined with the repetition of the thumbs up gesture creates a narrative within the video, almost as if it is a part of a story. The cameraperson posts the photo with a comment, "I found a place that feels like home away from home. But I won't tell you where it is". The purpose of this comment together with the initial message is to reveal to the audience watching the video that the goal of the journey was not to collect shiny objects for a photo but to visit and enjoy a place. The poster refuses to share the location intentionally to highlight the privacy of the moment to the Instagram audience. If there is a fictional element in the video, then it is contained in the message and the Instagram post. While these elements demonstrate the intention to keep the experience private (no notifications, no location tag), the video instead archives the experience and clearly shows the train

station near which the filming took place (Chestnut Hill East). This creates a contradiction between the intentions of the cameraperson, slightly divorcing them from myself as the director. These mobile media interactions are fictionalized primarily in order to show the multiplicity of ways in which experiences like this can be processed within mobile media and archived in a public or semi-public manner: you can film freely and randomly on the go to keep your memories and perhaps share them with others, or you can create a small memento in a form of a photograph and keep the full experience to yourself, only hinting to others about your journey.

Tying "home a-way" to theory, one of the thoughts behind video on-the-go, video-in-the-moment random kind of approach to this project was the idea of performativity and authenticity. Mobile video is often imagined to be more authentic, especially when it is shown to illustrate news reports through witnesses' video (Berry, 2017). Though this case is not tied to any news coverage, it borrows the idea of spontaneity from the impulse one could have to use their phone to film a disaster (Berry, 2017, p. 133) or something exciting, or surprising. In addition to the way mobile video is framed as authentic, mobile media in general can also amplify immersion through its mobility (Farman, 2014). Mobile media filmed locally can push the viewer familiar with the location or space to reconsider it, reimagine

it (Farman, 2014, p. 533). "home a-way" project uses that to its advantage by turning what might be seen by some as a normal commute into a joyful journey, attempting to convey the author's excitement from quiet trains and the green-red-yellow autumn-colored suburbia.

For some, this might look like an anti-technology or anti-social media narrative. The project does contain a bit of that, focusing on the short quote about solitude from Ling's (2014) work and taking it further to explore the possibilities of taking back that solitude with mobile media. The purpose is not to paint this one criticism as the absolute descriptor of mobile phones or social media though. "home a-way" represents a lot of implied social interactions and the use of media to communicate. The intention is to showcase that the lack of solitude and constant availability may be problematic but we may still use mobile technology itself to address those issues.

First of all, the video itself serves as a communication tool, referring back to Humphreys (2012), allowing the cameraperson's audience to witness an intimate moment in their life and so shortening the social distance between them. This is created entirely by the allowances of the mobile phone technology and the phone has to be constantly out of the pocket and on to allow the filming to happen. Nevertheless, in this case, the phone does not serve as a distraction or

disturbance to the depicted experience. The cameraperson is mediating a connection between technology and nature, themselves and nature, and themselves and technology. They are clearly communicating to themselves and their close ones (through the message in the beginning) that this is an experience in which they are aware of the phone in their hands and yet choose to make it a secondary tool rather than the focus.

Secondly, another main use of the recording is to archive/catalogue the memory (Humphreys, 2012) and experience in a way that renders the process itself fun. Using the phone as a recording device and as a toy, I am temporarily stripping it of its connective qualities, performing a sort of disconnection (Mannell, 2019) while still making use of the phone's mobility. In this way, the cataloguing process and the disconnection process are becoming tightly dependent on each other, requiring no interruptions (connections) in order for the memory to be properly recorded (archived/catalogued) and posted later, whether on a public page or on a private cloud server account.

Concluding, I am hoping that "home a-way" can demonstrate how joy can be recorded and even communicated to others without the loss of privacy and solitude, and how practices of disconnection can work hand in hand with using mobile media to enhance personal and private experiences. Theories discussed in

this paper show that both social networks and mobile technologies come with a lot of questions and both upsides and downsides. Video-making is only one highly specific way to address these but it demonstrates that communication and disconnection are complex issues that do not rely on simply fully accepting or rejecting technology.

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