

Curated Lives: Smartphones as Tools of Control, Anticipation and Avoidance

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This paper stems from looking at mobile phones and the role they play in our lives, focusing on how we use them as tools to connect and disconnect throughout our life stages. So trying to understand when we want to be connected, and when we do not want to be connected and why. In addition, trying to understand also how this relationship with mobile phones plays out throughout our lives, and throughout different settings in terms of cultural and geographical settings, probing smartphones, as tools of control, anticipation and avoidance.

I would like start this presentation by quoting a dialogue from the Steven Spielberg's movie "Minority Report". A dialogue that takes place amongst officers of the PreCrime unit and Danny Witwer, a Department of Justice agent sent to observe and evaluate the PreCrime process.

For those not familiar with this work, *Minority Report* is a 2002 American cyberpunk action thriller film loosely based on the 1956 short story "The Minority Report" by Philip K. Dick. It is set primarily in Washington, D.C., in the year 2054, where PreCrime, a specialized police department, apprehends criminals based on foreknowledge provided by two men and a woman called "precogs".

The dialogue goes:

WITWER: *Look, let's not kid ourselves, we are arresting individuals who've broken no law.*

JAD: *But they will.*

FLETCHER: *The commission of the crime itself is absolute metaphysics. The Precogs see the future. And they're never wrong.*

WITWER: *But it's not the future if you stop it. Isn't that a fundamental paradox?*

ANDERTON: *Yes, it is. You're talking about pre-determination, which happens all the time.*

The film's central theme is the question of free will versus determinism, but also deals with the role media plays in an information-saturated environment and many of its predictions have now become a reality, such as personalized ads, voice controlled homes, gesture-based computing and Big Data Policing.

This paper will argue that smartphones play a major role in a society that craves control and safety, and that they could be regarded as tools of "premediation" following Grusin's proposal (Grusin, 2010). The paper will address three questions: How does the mobile phone embodies "premediation"? Which features translate this nature? Moreover, what are the unintended consequences of this uses.

CONTROL, ANTICIPATION AND AVOIDANCE

In a context where we have already remediated the past, where we are constantly remediating the present, we now turn to the future. The goal is now to always be prepared, to avoid trauma or shock.

"Premediation then differs from the double logic of remediation in that it represents not a desire for immediacy but rather a fear of immediacy, of the kind of extreme moment of immediacy or transparency that 9/11 produced". (Grusin,

2004). In premediation the aim is to provide an affective experience of what might happen, to shield ourselves from anything that is actually uncomfortable, so we adopt several protocols of avoidance, anticipation and control. I will contend that mobile phone embodies this need for premediation. In addition, I want to bring you some examples that illustrate this premediation feature, from fiction and everyday life.

The first episode of season three of “Black Mirror: Nosedive”, portrays a society where you get a rating. So every interaction that you play out in society gets rated. You are rated by how you shop, why you shop, how you behave. Byung-chul Han speaks of a transparency society where he says that, “The society of transparency is not a society of trust but a society of control”. “Nosedive” this is the story of a girl who really wants to upgrade her rating to 4.5 because she wants to buy a house with a discount, and she only gets the discount if she has 4.5. The main character does everything to actually get that rating but as the name of the episode hints, it does not go well. Every daily activity is closely planned for the picture or for the rating. When she walks into a coffee shop and posts a picture perfect moment, we can see the the coffee is awful, but the rating is great. So she gets happy, not because the coffee was good, but because she got a very good rating. Being a fictional example, I think we all could easily relate, or see this happening throughout our interactions. This is especially true of the way we now curate our travel experiences. A report from hotels.com states that almost a third of people that travel would not enjoy their holiday without their phones. Therefore, even if the experience were good, if they did not have their mobile phone with them they would not enjoy themselves, much like in “Nosedive”. CheapCaribbean.com sells a holiday package called “Vacation Envy” that pairs travelers with social media experts so that you can provide a picture perfect holiday. So you get taught how to take pictures of yourself, and the scenario is laid out so that you can send home the pictures of the perfect holiday: “We helped them frame their pictures, taught them how to edit them in Instagram, what filters to put on, we gave them free hair and makeup, and showed them how to pick the best lighting so they actually had a really brag worthy vacation, which is what a lot of people are really looking for,” Mike Lowery, the chief marketing officer at CheapCaribbean.com

When you cannot go there, you can Instagram yourself, opening new business opportunities. Now companies are beginning to capitalize on the pressure to post awe-inducing photos on social media as well. Among the most



Figure 1 | Rumquatatur audaeria cuptatquatem necerum iunition emporiatquod endi tem veribus ciisit qui doluptas a sim velia sim laces quia que modi ut enimost, omnit omnihit aut volento que repudi alit et esecaerem quam laccaeptur?

successful is “Krome Photos”, a photo editing website that uses artificial intelligence to pair people with professional photo editors who can take your images and transform them to make it look like you’re anywhere in the world. The cost of edits range between \$3 and \$12 and most take between 12 or 24 hours. “Anything is possible”, the company’s website says. “In the old days our car or our house represented who we were,” said Eduardo Llach, the company’s chief executive and founder who compared his employment model to Uber. “Now, your online persona is everything and people are realizing that photos give you the ability to create whoever you want to be



All our interactions with the world involve our thoughts, our body capabilities, but also our history, our context, our social and cultural understanding that contextualizes and provides clues to deal with all that captures our attention: “Technics is the symbiosis of artefact and user within a human action” (Ihde, 2002, p. 508). For Don Ihde in each technology, we witness the clash of utopian and dystopian views. If on one hand we long for the transformation of our capabilities, on the other we want a natural experience, total transparency. A synthesis that is impossible to reach because, as Ihde claims, technologies are not neutral.

The actual or material technology always carries with it only a partial our quasi-transparency, which is the price for the extension of magnification that technologies give. In extending bodily capacities, the technology also transforms them. In that sense, all technologies in use are non-neutral. (Ihde, 2002, p. 509). Technological artifacts, such as the mobile phone, mediate our sensorial experience of reality, and by doing it, they transform what we perceive. This ability to transform is designated by Ihde as “intentionality”, meaning that technologies play an active role in the relationship people establish with the world around them. However, these intentionalities are not fixed properties of the artifacts; they take shape in the human-technology relation. In the context of different relations, technologies can have distinct identities. Ihde calls this phenomenon – multistability: the same technology can have different stabilities according to the way it fits its usage context. Human beings, their technologies and the surrounding world form an interdependent structural whole.

There is also a deeper desire that can arise from the experience of embodiment relations. It is the double desire that, on one side, is a wish for total transparency, total embodiment, for the technology to truly ‘become me’. The other side is the desire to have the power, the transformation that the technology makes available. (...) The desire is, at best, contradictory. I want the transformation that the technology allows, but I want it in such a way that I am basically unaware of its presence. P. 509

The same contradictory logic is noted by Bolter & Grusin: we seek to “simultaneously proliferate and to erase mediation, to eliminate all signs of mediation in the very act of multiplying them”.

The mobile phone embodies this double logic. It is a heavy contributor to the hypermediated world we live in, but at the same time, it perfectly translates the denial of the mediated character of digital technology

THE REMEDIAL NATURE OF THE MOBILE PHONE

Our lives are increasingly performed within a mobile connected context with high penetration rates all over the world. The main novelty of this context is the acquired ability to reach a person and not a place (Feldmann, 2005). Mobile phones have conquered a large amount of space in our daily lives and without them; we tend to feel lost, disconnected, and anxious; translating a strong emotional connection.

The mobile phone surely owes its massive adoption to its untethered nature, satisfying one of human’s most obvious need – to communicate on the move. It also remediates a wide range of former media:

“The mobile phone’s multifunctionality, as well as that of other ICTs testifies to the desire for reunification that modern society expresses in the face of its opposing tendency to divide, fragment and pulverize”.

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Simultaneously we seek the disappearance of the medium. We get angry when we do not get proper reception, or when the battery goes down and we are not able to make the phone call we wanted and we make it an extension of us – our virtual presence. The mobile phone is conceived as a visible prosthetics of the body in the McLuhan sense of extension. The mobile phone

is a multifunctional and multidimensional artefact that induces profound changes in our context: new uses of time, new ways of interacting with others and the end of space barriers between the professional and private, work and play, the past, the present and the future.

The mobile phone has led to what Hayles (1999) characterizes as the “denaturalization” of space. Mobile technologies annul natural characteristics by allowing a unique, individual experience of a specific space.

The pre-electronic locality was characterized by its physical and experiential boundedness. Situations were defined by where and when they took place and by who was physically present - as well as by where and when they were not taking place and by who was not physically at particular events. Now such boundedness requires some effort: Turn off the mobile phones, PDAs, and laptops; banish radio and television. Schools and churches continue this struggle to make “a space apart” (Meyrowitz, 2005, p. 28).

McLuhan (2002-1964), regarding the telephone had already stated that it was “an irresistible intruder in time and space” and described the change in human perception introduced by electricity. The effects of digital communication networks amplified this phenomenon. In the case of the mobile telephone, its ring seems to supersede any other activity with people feeling compelled to act upon it regardless of their activities or surroundings.

Location is a form of mental positioning and thus the usual question we all make when on our mobile phones – “Where are you?”, Ferraris (2005) observes how we changed from asking “Who is it?” when answering the telephone to “Where are you?” with mobile calls given we have lost our geographical reference to a house, “we no longer ring a location and attempt to reach a person, but ring a person and attempt to locate them” (Light, 2009). We also say: “I will be on my mobile phone”, that is the place where we can be found and thus suggesting what Sherry Turkle describes as a “tethered self” (2008). The importance of location also becomes visible in the success of location-based services (LBS) and Apps such as Waze, or google maps.

Mobile technologies have privatized the public sphere. With mobile technologies we reconfigure our public space, we build walls where they do not physically exist but we also tear them down. Feldmann (2005) has noted the hybridizing of public and private space as one of the main characteristics of the mobile communication system. Today privacy means to be in control of the information flow and the mobile phone provides that control.

The mobile phone has become our permanent connection to information and our social network. It is constantly on and with us, becoming a kind of place where we can be found (Lasen, 2002). We have ceased to organize our life in space compartments. We are available wherever we are and we can even resuscitate time, as the one we spend in transportation or in waiting lines. We live an interaction dynamic where uses surpass context. The bus can now be a classroom and the classroom a playground.

In this quest to control time and space, the mobile phone is used to obtain a sense of security, to coordinate daily

activities and to keep us at reach independently of our time reference and space coordinates. In an increasingly mobile society, the mobile phone has become a place for many of us - the place where we can be found, and the place where we can hide.

The mobile phone allows us to live in a constant movie trailer context. We can seduce, prepare, avoid, and create lower or higher expectations, and thus curate our lives. This is the general nature of the mobile phone but some features, as text messaging, or social media Apps, translate it better than others do.

The mobile phone is also used to obtain a sense of security and provides freedom of movement by also ensuring we always feel supported: “mobile communication is not about mobility but about autonomy. The possibility to reach any one at any time anywhere provides this safe autonomy pattern that characterizes the daily life of millions” (Manuel Castells, 2008: 448).

This autonomy provided by mobility, this ability to move around across different spaces closely relates to power relationships (Cresswell, 2006; Urry, 2000, 2007). Different groups have very different experiences of mobility that are regulated by relationships of power regarding space: “some are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movements; some are more on the receiving end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it” (1993, p. 63).

The device allows its users to extend to outer spaces a function that was valued so much in the landline telephone – keeping in touch with those that are emotionally important in what Klára Sándor calls “mental safety in your pocket” (Sándor, 2005a).

The embodiment characteristics of the mobile phone device, its nature of “perpetual contact” also gives way to the user’s own disembodiment that takes its most radical form in text messages where not even the traces of the body conveyed by the voice are present. Much like the telephone, the mobile phone offers many (women, racial discriminated groups) new opportunities for disembodiment that enable them to occupy spaces that are otherwise scary or hostile to them or to be “communicatively present while being physically absent” (Wajcman, Bittman, & Brown, 2008). This also enables to manage difficult relationships and avoid hostility as conveyed by one of the women interviewed for my research on women’s uses of the mobile phone (Ganito, 2016) that found the mobile phone text message service very useful for managing the relationship with her recent ex-husband:

“When I dated my now ex-husband, we did not have a mobile phone so I never used it to date but, now that we are divorced and there is conflict, I use e-mail and text messages to talk to him because it is very hard to talk face-to-face. It helps a lot because I end up not getting as nervous as I would if we were physically together. I do not have to see his reactions to what I am saying. It helps to avoid stress and anxiety”
Carmen, 40 years old, recently divorced,
mother of two, sole caregiver.

In this research on women and mobile phones security and control proved to be two of the main reasons women either decided to buy a mobile phone or had one given to them. Mobile phones become shields or technological bodyguards.

We are creating new actors, the “absent-present” (Gergen, 2002) and “new social events” (Caron & Caronia, 2007). Mobile phones serve as shields or technological bodyguards.



Mobile phones serve as shields or technological bodyguards.

In the middle of a room full of strangers in a depressing or simply dull situation, we can (virtually) be with those whom we are in a close relationship. We can instantly share our experience with them, we can ask them for help in solving a problem, we can get some comfort from them – or we can simply escape from the situation we are physically in to a mentally safer virtual environment (Sándor, 2005b, pp. 20-21).

Resorting to mobile phones, we establish cocoons that are “micro-places built through private, individually controlled infrastructures, temporarily appropriating public space for personal use” (Mizuko Ito, et al., 2008, p. 74).

In their study of the hybridization of home and workspaces, Wajcman et al propose the concept of “connected presence” to explain these social practices. This concept of “connected presence” or “families without borders” was also well expressed by many of the women I interviewed (Ganito, 2016):

The mobile phone is always with me. I never turn it off. I used to do so but since my mother became sick and I have always left it on. And even after she died, I kept on doing so because I am afraid someone might need me. And my father is becoming old as well and I feel more reassured this way. I once spent a day without it and it was hard. It is an anguish not to be able to provide for my kid at a distance. I would be anxious about not being able to speak to my son (Cecília, 46 years old, divorced, mother of a pre-adolescent son, sole caregiver).

We are living in a culture of “perpetual contact” where the mobile phone invades even the smallest and most sacred places of our lives, our churches and our classrooms, our beds, when placed under the pillow by a teenage girl so that no message gets missed, and our office bathrooms so that no phone call gets left unanswered.

The need to be always in touch has also enhanced the embodiment of mobile phones through wearable devices. They are carried closer to our bodies; they become an extension of our senses, a prosthetic device for our voice, our eyes and our ears. And, within this process, they are the object of embodiment and disembodiment practices.

As embodied objects, they form part of power relationships interrelated with the presence or invisibility of certain places such as our streets, our homes and our offices.

One of the most noted reasons for wanting and needing this constant availability to others, and of others, is an emergency. This represented one of the most commonly referred justification in the studies on the use of the mobile phone: (M. Castells, et al., 2004; Chayko, 2008; J. Katz & Aakhus, 2002; Ling, 2004). The resistance arises out of the perceived notion regarding the loss of privacy: This perception leads many to engage in creative forms of avoidance and also justifies the preference for asynchronous forms of communication, especially text messages or Apps such as WhatsApp. Users are opting for asynchronous forms of conversation or tools that enable them to display status information that allows for a better management of privacy and availability. People now coordinate important calls in advance through e-mail, text messages or chat and ensuring not only that those calls become more effective but also enabling control over social interactions.

UNINTENDED USES AND CONSTANT REFUSALS



Figure 2 | One of the first movie appearances of the videophone in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927).

If we look at media evolution we soon realize that many of the current uses were completely unexpected and sometimes it is the most unexpected of them that dictate the success of a technology. One vivid example, in the scope of the mobile phone, is the massive success of text messaging. Text message was never on mobile providers marketing plans. The service was intended to allow operators to inform all their own customers about things such as problems with the network, necessary updates. But soon users, especially the younger, more prone to experimenting and with lower budgets, found that it could be used to convey messages to other users for free. The first text message was used in December 1992 but it took it more than seven years to take off as a commercial service because many companies did not charge for it as they thought there was no market in text for a device they regarded as being mainly for voice.

Today, text messaging is one of the most successful features, besides voice. We can argue that it owes its success first of all to its non-intrusive nature. As we never know

where we are going to find the ones we call, a text message ensures minimum disturbance: “the silence of text is probably its biggest social asset” (P. Levinson, 2004, p. 112).



It is also a better way of conveying specific or complex information and to control it. With text we can decide when to answer and have time to think through what to answer. Voice is impulse and text is to ponder. Finally, text allows the user to control the length of the interaction and the context. In text there is no background noise and no specific tone, so it allows for a higher degree of privacy. These affordances of text were well explained by users in a study of mobile gossip (Fox, 2001) where participants reported using text instead of voice because they were shy, lazy or felt had nothing special to say: “for example one participant always send text messages to his mother, as he knows that phoning her would tie him into a long conversation”. Or, as others reported:

Texting is less stressful as one has time to think of witty and articulate things to say (mobile gossip).

You can set someone up with a text message – create the anticipation of what you are going to say, before you meet up with them (mobile gossip).

In the scope of McLuhan's tetrad of media effects (1964) texting would be in the quadrant of reversal. McLuhan said that, when pushed to extremes and as a reaction to its unintended consequences, the medium reverses to a previous form. In the face of total access, we voluntarily constrain our freedom of communication, at least the oral one. And we could say that the constant introduction of features is what pushed the mobile phone to its limits.

Contrary to text messages, that was mainly an accident, an unintended use; the concept of video calls has been around for a long time. The first movie reference is from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), but long before that we have multiple references to video telephony. And since then, popular culture has hundreds of references to the eternal promise of distance communication.

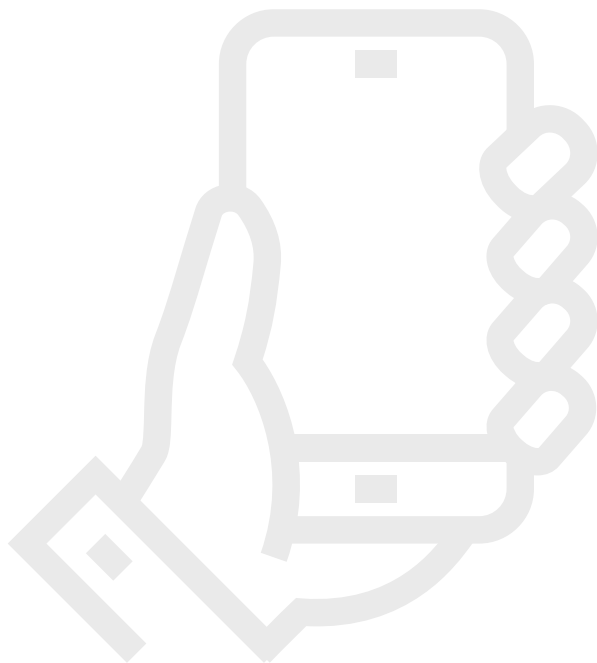
The first demonstration of a two-way videophone dates from 1930 and was conducted by Bell and AT&T. Since then phone companies have tried to push the technology to the market, despite early signs that the consumers were not too much interested in it. Bell's own market research, dating from the late 1950s revealed that people do not always want to be seen as they chat on the phone. It would be as intrusive as having to answer the door on your robe. The lack of control over presentation has led people away from massive adoption. Nevertheless, video conferencing has been quite successful in professional contexts where indeed you control your performance.

Video calls are considered highly intrusive and have never gone past the toy phase of technology. You could try it for a couple of times or use it in exceptional circumstances but you do not accept it in your daily routine as an unplanned activity:

The camera in the phone performs at the extreme, outer limit of how the cell phone can invade our privacy – it is clearly a use of the cell phone that has nothing to do with what the cell phone is intrinsically about. It is, instead, in its worst examples, a perversion of the cell phone and its purposes. In contrast, texting in many ways epitomizes what the cell phone was always intended to do: allows us to converse whenever we want, which, in the case of texting, now includes conversing in such a way that no one around us need know we are conversing (Paul Levinson, 2006).

Although camera phones are hugely successful, most of the uses are for reporting (asynchronous) and not live conversations. With live calls, the phone can no longer be used as a shield, a gatekeeper and thus would lose its usefulness as a tool of “premediation”.

As premediation features proliferate our devices, which in turn are increasingly embodied through wearables and ambient technologies, we must ponder on the challenges those uses bring: technostress, breach of privacy, diminished free will, especially in vulnerable groups such as the elderly were under the promise of safety we witnessing a system of bio surveillance. Or with children and teenagers with the rise of control parenting practices to the extreme of what is now popularly known as helicopter parenting.



CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the scope of Bolter and Grusin theory of Remediation, each new media refashions prior media forms, in a double logic by which, we simultaneously thrive to proliferate the world with media, increasingly fragmenting our background and mediating our experience, through the enhancement of our senses; and to create media technologies that are transparent, that create an illusion of complete embodiment. We favor the media that evolve towards getting closer to our natural human experience, but at the same time we keep alive the dream of an ideal communication context, to transcend our bodily constraints.

The mobile phone, not only embeds the double logic of remediation, but has also proven to be a fantastic tool of premediation, enabling us to shield against the unplanned future. In its evolution process some features have proven more successful in satisfying this need than others. Although video calls seem to fulfill the dreams of an ideal communication landscape, they do not get wide acceptance and are kept as an entertaining or niche feature. On the contrary, text messaging, or social media, that at first glance could seem a step back in the evolution process is one of the most successful services provided for the mobile phone. As for video calls, they seem condemned to science fiction movies. They seem to be the eternal postponed future of communication.

We articulate between our “immersed selves” and our “connected selves” in a precarious balance. To which Grusin argues that we have added the concern with the premediation of the future. In a world of constant change and high-perceived risk, we crave media ubiquity to be prepared.

We anticipate every step of our future experience. Take the given example of travel where premediation has reached its height. The majority of us no longer leaves for a trip without a travel guide, we can access real time webcams or google maps to map our territory; we entail long distance conversations with locals through our social networks; we are able to pre-choose a flight seat chosen based on recommendations, we have seen all the pictures and videos we can of the hotel we are staying or the sights we are seeing. In addition, we depart fully equipped with our mobile Internet access and our GPS so that we never have to stop to look for directions, choose a restaurant or an activity. We have erased the room for surprise, for the unexpected, in trying to prevent the possibility of a traumatic future.

We curate for every aspect of our lives: the past, the present and the future, we let go of our freedom in the name of comfort and safety, how far are we willing to go, as individuals, and as communities? I do not have an answer and that answer will probably take many meanings and shapes, but I do know that it is important to keep asking questions, to develop and instill a critical inquiry into our students and peers. That is what we can do: to keep on questioning, to keep debating. I believe in the co-construction of technology, that it uses will be shaped by our actions and in the words of Abraham Lincoln: “The best way to predict the future is to create it”.

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