COORDINATING MOBILE LIFE

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ABSTRACT

In the richer parts of the world, where social networks are stretched out and distant connections are common, it is increasingly difficult to meet up spontaneously. Meetings have to be coordinated spatially and temporally in advance. Organising co-presence with significant others is demanding and complex especially as networks typically do not overlap much.

This article thus discusses the changing nature of arrangements to meet. In particularly it discusses some shifts in those systems of coordination. We will show that there have been some striking changes in the methods of coordination – we describe the shift as that from punctuality effected through clock time to a negotiated fluid coordination effected through mobile communications. We consider how the greater spatial scale and personalisation of networks, makes more important those ‘coordination systems’ that facilitate travel and make important meetings realised.

Travel is thus not merely about ‘getting there’ but of arriving at the right time. We explore via some original research how travel is not so much a question of movement as of spacing and timing. We examine shifts in the nature of those coordination systems that enable travel through time-space and which result in intermittent attendance at meetings and at events, for business, for professional life, for friendship, for families. We deploy the concept of ‘network capital’.
INTRODUCTION

Much travel stems from the ‘compulsion to proximity’, the desire and need to be corporeally co-present with distanced significant others, whether they are colleagues, business partners, friends, partners or family members, or to be present at specific timed events. However, in the richer parts of the world, where social networks are stretched out and distant connections are common, it is difficult to meet up spontaneously. Meetings have rather to be coordinated spatially and temporally in advance. Organising co-presence with significant others is demanding and complex especially as people’s stretched out networks will typically not overlap much with each other (Jarvis, 2005; Townsend, 2004; Fortunati 2005). Networks seem to be increasingly ‘personalised’.

This article thus discusses the changing nature of arrangements to meet. In particularly it discusses some shifts in those systems of coordination. We will show that there have been some striking changes in the methods of coordination – we describe the shift as that from punctuality effected through clock time to a negotiated fluid coordination effected through mobile communications. We consider how the greater spatial scale and personalisation of networks, makes more important those ‘coordination systems’ that facilitate travel and make important meetings realised. We seek to develop a geography and sociology of meetings and arrangements.

Travel is thus not merely about ‘getting there’ – by feet, cycle, car, train, boat, plane - but also of arriving at the right time, at that specific moment when the meeting, match, wedding, funeral or dinner commence. Travel is not so much a
question of movement as of spacing and timing. Coordinating meetings are thus both a spatial and a temporal practice. Space and time cannot be analysed separately when investigating mobility or social life more generally. We examine shifts in the nature of those coordination systems that enable travel through time-space and which result in intermittent attendance at meetings and at events, for business, for professional life, for friendship, for families.

This article in particular examines how physical travel and communications fold into each other, and thus how they work together for the performances of physical travel. We begin with Simmel and his analysis of early twentieth century travel and its linking with the clock and the watch. We refer to this as clock-time punctuality. Systems of motion and timing developed in tandem and reinforced each other. The next section argues that because mobile phones are now as ubiquitous as pocket watches were a century ago, they are symbolic of current time. Mobiles afford a mobile, networked social life, a ‘networked individualism’. We argue that mobile phones and emails under specific circumstances ‘afford’ fluid and flexible meeting cultures that are less dictated by fixed appointments and clock-time. This is further facilitated by the widespread shift from public transport to ‘flexible car systems’.

The next section draws upon some recent research we conducted in the UK upon social networks and mobility to analyse how affordances and embodied practices of communication coordinate travel and co-presence. It is shown how communication affordances are context dependent and that different meeting cultures exist. This research indicates that clock-time punctuality is increasingly replaced with a more fluid and flexible ‘network time’.
Simmel famously writes that the metropolitan type of personality consists in ‘the intensification of nervous stimulation’ which results from the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli’ (1997: 175). The modern city involves the ‘unexpectedness of onrushing impressions … With each crossing of the street, with the tempo and multiplicity of economic, occupational and social life’, he says that the city sets up a ‘deep contrast with small town and rural life with reference to the sensory foundations of psychic life’ (Simmel 1997: 175). The onrushing stimulations create a new psychic and sensory configuration, the blasé attitude, the incapacity to react to new sensations with appropriate energy. The movement of the city generates reserve and indifference.

Moreover, because of the effect of money with ‘all its colourlessness and indifference’ (Simmel 1997: 178), but also because of its twin, the modern city, a new precision comes to be necessary in such a life. Agreements and arrangements need to demonstrate unambiguousness in timing and location. Life in the mobile onrushing city presupposes punctuality and this is reflected according to Simmel by the ‘universal diffusion of pocket watches’ (1997: 177). The watch was a century ago as symbolic of the ‘modern’ as the ubiquitous mobile phone today. Simmel argues that the ‘relationships and affairs of the typical metropolitan usually are so varied and complex that without the strictest punctuality in promises and services the whole structure would break down into an inextricable chaos’ (1997: 177). This necessity for punctuality: ‘is brought about by the aggregation of so many people with such differentiated interests who must integrate their relations and activities into a highly complex organism’ (Simmel 1997: 177). In particular Simmel asserts that:
If all clocks and watches in Berlin would suddenly go wrong in different ways, even if only by one hour, all economic life and communication of the city would be disrupted for a long time. Thus, the technique of metropolitan life is unimaginable without the most punctual integration of all activities and mutual relations into a stable and impersonal time schedule (1997: 177):

Thus the forming of complex systems of relationships mean that meetings and activities have to be punctual, timetabled, rational, a system or ‘structure of the highest impersonality’ often involving much distance-keeping politeness (Simmel 1997: 178; Toiskallio 2002: 171). This ‘system-ness’ of mobility is crucial and results in the individual becoming ‘a mere cog in an enormous organization of things and powers’; as a result ‘life is made infinitely easy for the personality in that stimulations, interests, uses of time and consciousness are offered to it from all sides’ (Simmel 1997: 184). Simmel tellingly notes how as a consequence: ‘t[They]ey carry the person as if in a stream, and one needs hardly to swim for oneself’ (Simmel 1997: 184).

But simultaneously city life produces people each with a ‘highly personal subjectivity’, a tendency to be ‘different’, of standing out in a striking manner and thereby seeking attention (Simmel 1997: 178). Urban life produces what we now call a pronounced ‘culture of narcissism’ (Lasch 1980). Simmel argues that people gain self-esteem through being aware of how they are specifically perceived by others. But because of the scale of mobility in the metropolis there is a ‘brevity and scarcity of inter-human contacts’ (Simmel 1997: 183). Compared with the small-scale community, the modern city gives room to the individual and to the peculiarities of their inner and outer development. It is the spatial form of modern urban life that
permits the unique development of individuals who socially interact with an exceptionally wide range of contacts forming a distinct set of networks. People seek to distinguish themselves; to be different through adornment and fashion encountering each other in brief moments of proximity.

So metropolitan life, its rush and fragmentation, generates both powerful objective systems partly concerned with maintaining rules of distance and formality, and very varied personal subjectivities. According to Simmel, ‘one nowhere feels as lonely and lost as in the metropolitan crowd’ and when traveling by public transport:

The feeling of isolation is rarely as decisive and intense when one actually finds oneself physically alone, as when one is a stranger, without relations, among many physically close persons, at a ‘party’ on a train or in the traffic of a large city (Simmel cited in Wolff 1950: 119).

While the early modern metropolis, on the one hand, produced people with a ‘highly personal subjectivity’, it produced objective systems of punctuality and pocket watches that isolated people ‘distance-keeping politeness’, on the other. Simmel’s work thus highlights how ‘personalisation’ makes people depend upon complex systems and inflexible time.

The pocket watch was just one of many early modern ‘systems’. The invention of organised leisure travel and tourism in the mid-nineteen century relied upon the standardised time of Greenwich Mean Time, timetables and pocket watches (Lash and Urry 2004; see also Green 2002; Klein 2004). Everyday mobility in early twenty-century cities such as Berlin was above all by public transport, which means that
punctuality has to be secure. So pocket watches and public transport were early modern twins.

Another technology of that period was the landline telephone that allowed communications with absent others. But the landline phone confined talk at-a-distance to homes and offices. So people had to stay put when undertaking ‘communicative travel’. In the era of pocket watches, public transport and landlines, meetings had to be organised in painstaking detail and people had to know their route and to arrive on time in the right place. The objective, unbending time of pocket watches determined whether people arrived successfully. They were equally inflexible and part of the same pre-mobile phone coordination system that we can characterise as ‘clock time punctuality’.

‘NETWORKED INDIVIDUALISM’, MOBILES AND FLUID COORDINATION

In this section we consider various literatures that suggest that ‘clock time punctuality’ is being replaced by more fluid forms of coordination. We begin by noting how the last decade or so has seen striking increases in long distance travel and in communication at-a-distance (through mobile phone calls, text messaging, email, blackberries, videoconferences and so on)\(^1\). In 2004 there was a record 760m legal international tourist arrivals\(^2\). People in Britain are travelling five times further per year than in the 1950s. This figure is expected to double again by 2025. This principally results from car travel which has set in train novel kinds of family life, community and leisure (Featherstone, Thrift, Urry 2005). International telephone calls increased at least tenfold between early 1982 and 2001 (Vertovec, 2004: 223). The

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1 For sources on this data see Larsen, Urry, Axhausen 2006.
Internet and mobile phones have been adopted more rapidly than any previous technology. In 2003, two-thirds of the UK adult population were Internet users. There are now more mobile phones than landlines and, in May 2003, 75 per cent of all adults in UK own or use a mobile phone\(^3\) and more than 2 billion texts messages are sent each month. These different mobilities seem to increase with each other since such communications are intricately tied up with coordinating and facilitating physical travel.

The social sciences have historically concentrated upon human subjects interacting together and ignored the material and communication systems that provide the infrastructures of co-presence and social life more generally. This is evident in Boden’s work on meetings that sustains the idea that face-to-face co-presence is ontologically different from mediated communication (1994). Whereas Boden highlights differences between co-presence and communications, others show how they increasingly intermingle and how unmediated body-to-body talk is dwindling in modern societies that are saturated with machines, images and communications (Fortunati 2005). People are increasingly ‘face-to-face-to-mobile-phone’ as the mobile phone is brought along even when meeting socially (Katz and Aakhus 2002: 2). As Wittel says:

> It is impossible to separate face-to-face interactions from interactions over distance. In urban spaces the idea of an uninterrupted face-to-face sociality, disentangled from technological devices, is becoming a myth. More and more, we are experiencing an integration of long-distance communication in our

realms of face-to-face interaction … It is hard to imagine a dinner of, let’s say, four businessmen without a mobile ringing (2001: 70).

And face-to-face meetings transform into face-to-interface interactions when computer documents are worked upon, PowerPoint presentations begin, mobile phones ring and so on. Face-to-face meetings are mediated and connected to other meetings; they are typified by ‘absent presence’ (Gergen 2002). As Callon and Law maintain more generally, ‘presence is not reducible to copresence … copresence is both a location and a relation’ (2004: 6, 9). Communications are now rarely a sequence of face-to-face-encounters within specific physical spaces (Katz and Aakhus 2002; Licoppe 2004; Ling 2004).

Other research brings out how communication technologies afford a kind of communicative co-presence. First, the longer the geographical distance between people the longer they seem to talk (see Licoppe 2004). Immigrants, people with family members abroad and long-distance couples frequently engage in lengthy and recurrent telephone conversations; transnational connectivity through cheap telephone calls being central to their lives. Long distance calls seem to resemble physical meetings: they are lengthy turn-taking encounters through which gossip is shared, troubles are talked through, previous meetings are evaluated, solidarity is expressed, roles affirmed and future meetings arranged. They are the best substitute for physical meetings when these cannot take place (Holmes 2004; Pribilsky 2004; Vertovec 2004).

Communication technologies also play a major role in facilitating co-present meetings. Most telephone calls are brief calls concerned with coordinating face-to-face meetings and desynchronised social life more generally (Ling and Ytrri 2002;
Ling 2004). Wellman’s studies indicate that ‘computer mediated communication supplements arranges and amplifies in-person and telephone communication rather than replacing them’ (2001: 242; Hampton and Wellman 2001; Boase, Wellman 2004). Those on-line are also most active in face-to-face civic work. ‘Frequent contact on the Internet is a complement to frequent face-to-face contact, not a substitute for it’ (Wellman, cited in Putnam 2001: 179; Wellman, Haythornthwaite 2002).

Mobile phones afford fluid, mobile meetings culture and what Wellman terms ‘person-to-person’ communities and ‘networked individualism’. The notion of ‘networked individualism’ has much in common with the individualisation thesis of Giddens and Beck. To cite the latter: ‘The individual as actor’ is the ‘designer, juggler and stage director of his [sic] own biography, identity, social networks, commitments and convictions’ (Beck 2001: 166; Giddens 1994). The notion of ‘person-to-person’ community highlights that it is the person rather than place that increasingly matters. ‘The person has become the portal’ (Wellman 2001: 238). Whereas the emblematic technology of ‘place-to-place’ connectivity was the fixed landline telephone, the mobile is the technology of ‘person-to-person’ networks. ‘Mobile phones afford a fundamental liberation from place, and they soon will be joined by wireless computers and personalized software’ (Wellman 2001: 238). While landlines eliminate the necessity for physical proximity, they reinforce the need to be present at specific places. Personalised, wireless worlds afford ‘networked individualism’, each person is, so to say, the engineer of his/her own ties and networks, and always connected (technologies of batteries and masts permitting), no matter where she/he is going and staying. Or as Licoppe reports: ‘the mobile phone is portable, to the extent of seeming to be an extension of its owner, a personal object constantly there, at hand … Wherever they go, individuals seem to carry their network of connections which
could be activated telephonically at any moment’ (2004: 139). The mobile phone frees people from spatial fixity and is one of the most common items and used taken on a journey (Lyons, Jain, Holley 2005; Geser 2004: 4). Wellman argues that networked individualism: ‘suits and reinforces mobile lifestyles and physically dispersed relationships’ (2001: 239).

Widespread mobile phone cultures afford small worlds of communicative co-presence in midst of absence, distance and disconnection. Absent others are always only a call or text away so people can be in communication with significant others while in sea of strangers (Roos 2001). Nowhere are people more busy calling and texting than when in motion and transit, and modern cities are no longer characterized by ‘isolation’ but by connectivity, private worlds of distant talk. Trains, buses, cars, streets and waiting lounges are now places of much communication and where travel time can be made productive (Lyons, Urry 2005). Other research suggests that new social routines are engendering spaces that are ‘in-between’ home, work and social life, forming ‘interspaces’ (Hulme, Truch 2005). These are places of intermittent movement where groups come together, involving the use of phones, mobiles, laptops, SMS messaging, wireless communications and so on, often to make arrangements ‘on the move’. Some ‘meetings’ consist of ‘underground’ social gatherings or ‘smart mobs’ located in between the formal locations of work or home (Rheingold 2002).

Moreover, mobile phones can eliminate the need for rigid pre-coordination as people can be in ‘perpetual contact’ regardless of physical location (Katz and Aakhus 2002). Mobile ‘phonespaces’ afford fluid and instantaneous meeting cultures where venue, time, group and agenda can be negotiated with the next call or text. This system is liberating and coercive. As Townsend says:
The old schedule of minutes, hours, days, and weeks becomes shattered into a constant stream of negotiations, reconfigurations, and rescheduling. One can be interrupted or interrupt friends and colleagues at any time. Individuals live in this phonespace they can never let it go, because it is their primary link to the temporally, spatially fragmented network of friends and colleagues they have constructed for themselves (Townsend 2000: unpaginated).

The mobile phone seems to be the most useful device for those working on the move, providing important communications with co-workers and clients (Laurier 2004). Over a fifth of rail passengers thought that having such devices with them made the time on the train a lot better (though nearly half of all passengers, 46 per cent, considered electronic devices had not made the travel time any better). Those travelling first class were more likely to consider that such communication devices made their time use more effective (Lyons, Jain, Holley 2005).

Crucially important in this is fluid coordination and networked individualism is the availability of car-based travel. Cars avoid much of the timetabling involved in most public transport. It is possible to leave late by car, to miss connections, to travel in a relatively timeless fashion. Cars afford flexibility with regard to route and time schedule (Urry 2004).

Overall then it seems that crucial to the character of modern societies is something we term ‘network capital’ (as opposed to economic, cultural and political capital). Those groups high in network capital enjoy significant advantages within the systems of social inequality operating in the contemporary world. Network capital comprises six elements:
1. **movement competences**: to walk distances within different environments, to board different means of mobility, to carry or move baggage, to read timetabled information, to access computerised information, to arrange and re-arrange connections and meetings, the ability to use mobile phones, text messaging, email, the Internet, skype etc

2. **location free information and contact points**: sites where information and communications can arrive, be stored and retrieved (includes real/electronic diaries, address books secretary, office, answering service, email, web sites, mobile)

3. **communication devices**: to make and remake arrangements especially on the move and in conjunction with others who may also be on the move

4. **appropriate, safe and secure meeting places**: both en route and at the destination(s) (can include office, club space, hotel, public spaces, interspace)

5. **physical and financial access** to a car, roadspace, fuel, lifts, aircraft, trains, ships, taxis, buses, trams, minibuses and so on

6. **time/money/resources to manage and coordinate-5**: especially when there is system failure as will intermittently happen

In the empirical research reported below we investigate various social groups, some of which enjoy high levels of network capital – but not especially high levels of economic capital. We will see how their lives in part on the move come to be organised from day to day, week to week, year to year. Time as well as space are central then to a mobile and networked life (see May, Thrift 2001; Shove 2002).
RESEARCHING COORDINATION

The significance of ‘networked individualism’ and fluid meeting cultures are striking in research we conducted with a purposive sample of 24 youngish (under 38 years of age) architects; sales managers, personal trainers and receptionists in health and fitness clubs; and security doormen and porters[^4]. This research explores to what degree social networks are geographically ‘stretched out’ and what the consequences are of this ‘stretching’ for people’s social life and their likely future travel patterns. We focus upon these three occupations/industries because they are statistically expanding and significantly differ with regard to education, salary/status and, we hypothesise, mobility patterns.

This research indicates that far-flung social networks are relatively common and people have to undertake much domestic and international tourist-type travel to meet up occasionally with distant connections. Few reside in ‘little boxes’ where people live close propinquity and people regularly come around to each other’s homes unannounced; this porter is thus unusual when stating that:

I probably see my sister and brother in law every other day … it’s 2 minutes in the car … I probably see my mum and dad and my other 2 little sisters probably once or twice a week … if we’ve gone out to the shop somewhere and we’re driving past their road, we’d probably just stop off and have a drink, have a brew or something and then go home (S. male porter, mid-twenties).

[^4]: This research is funded by the UK Department for Transport. We are grateful for this support but the views expressed here are ours; DfT is not responsible for the material or arguments presented here. For much more detail see Larsen, Urry, Axhausen 2006.
Yet he also has close friends and family members more than an hours drive away that he regularly visits. Indeed the respondents combine ‘local’ and ‘distant’ connections. On average, they live as measured in the distance a crow flies, xxx km from their ‘most important people’ in their life at present. Most belong to 4-5 different social networks. When networks are stretched and overlap relatively little, there is less likelihood of quick, casual, unplanned meetings and fewer possibilities for walking to meet up (by western standards). So people need to ‘travel’ to maintain their fragmented networks and they are thus dependent upon cars or public transport. Indeed on average per year the respondents make almost 10 UK journeys (of more than 100 miles) primarily to visit significant others and attend ‘obligatory’ events such as Christmas parties, birthdays, weddings and funerals. Much time is spent communicating with people to coordinate such co-presence. Dispersed network members need coordination systems such as email and mobile phones in order to make the arrangement.

Indeed all the respondents own a mobile and so do all their friends and most family members. Most have them ‘turned on’ and at hand for 24 hours, and they are only ‘on silence’ at work and occasionally when socialising with significant others. The respondents disagree whether it is reasonable to engage with incoming calls when together with a friend, but the majority indicate that thus is now common.

All respondents make both calls and send text messages. The youngest people in the sample use their mobiles most. Each day the architects ‘surf the web’ professionally and for news, cultural events, cheap flights, travel information and so on. And they often email professionally and socially. By comparison, the two other ‘professions/industries’ email less both professionally and socially. This research
indicates that there is a positive correlation between the number of professional
emails and private emails.

Computers/emailing and mobile phones are crucial networking tools (network
capital) that are used as calendars, address books, photo albums, telephone books and
indeed watches (pocket watches are now primarily fashion gadgets). They produce
and/or store music, games, photos, video clips, articles and messages and they are
circulated amongst network members sometimes over great distances. Mobile phones
are thus multi-tasking technologies much more complex than one-dimensional
landline phones.

Mobile phones have become ‘travel partners’ to such extent that people feel
incomplete if leaving for a journey without it:

I’ll know about it if it’s not there because you know you can’t leave the house
and you think something’s missing. It’s got to be with me definitely. It’s got to
be with me (N, male sales advisor, late twenties).

They describe their mobile phones as prosthetic, as physically coterminous with their
bodies. Mobile phones allow that allow them to be ‘proper’ social beings. Without
them, they are ‘lost’:

I’ve lost it once. This sounds so bad, but it was the worst week of my life. I
didn’t have a clue what I was doing or anything … the worst thing was all my
numbers were on it (S, Doorman, early twenties).
More or less everyone express, not without a little shame that their life depends upon mobile phones; they are necessary social tools. As an architect reports:

But as soon as I got one I suddenly realised that I just couldn’t live without it. It’s been a great….yeah it’s a hell of a social tool (K, male architect, early thirties)

Mobile phones are no longer ‘extravagant’ and ‘frivolous’ but ‘necessary evils’ that have become a natural part of the human body, always at-hand. So when people misplace their mobiles they are ‘lost’ in the sense of being disabled, physically and socially: physically, because they have lost the now ‘natural’ ability to talk with absent others; and socially, because they are disconnected from their social networks. Among youngish people mobiles are ‘lifelines’ between network members because few people now remember more than a few numbers. So a landlines connection cannot satisfactorily substitute a ‘lost’ mobile phone. People would be lost in a no-man’s land of nonconnectivity; without tools for coordination they will enjoy less face-to-face interaction.

This is also the case with email:

Today there was an acknowledgment of the Travel Lodge booking that I did. Another one was we’ve had a tournament cancelled and obviously it was distributed to the team …another one I got today…I always get together with my girlfriends from school on a Thursday evening, so it was making arrangement … I don’t chat, I don’t gossip on email. It’s all arranging (J, female architect, early thirties).
For this female architect, who coaches a youth sports team, the typical email is about arranging travel and co-presence. Like most others, she books flights and accommodation for her private holidays and the team on the Internet, because she finds it cheaper and less time consuming than going to a travel agent every second week or so that she undertakes a longer journey with her partner or team. She also uses the Internet to arrange matches and tournaments across the UK. And she coordinates her weekly meeting with local friends by email. This illustrates how email at least amongst the architects travels short as well as long distances and coordinates meetings between people both close by and at a significant distances.

Distant connections are especially coordinated by email, especially when many are involved and long distance travel is required. An architect, who undertook 25 tourist-type journeys across the UK to visit friends in 2004, reports:

You do find a lot of emails are for weekends that you organise… Yesterday I had an email because my wife and me are organising a weekend to go away to the Cotswolds, so we are renting a cottage. There’s 6 of us, 8 of us going. So obviously there’s a lot of emails coming in, being sent round, saying I can do such and such a weekend … . And then you get one back saying it’s going to cost us, you know, £100 each for the weekend, can you send the money, post a cheque to me (L, male architect, late twenties).

Emails are time effective as a single email can be sent to multiple people and they can reply to the whole list with additional information, without distorting the original and subsequent texts. Everybody within this network thus shares and has equal access to
the same information, and the responsibility of organizing the event is thus more equally distributed. At the end, everyone has the written documentation about dates and venues stored in their mailbox that they can consult at a later stage. But this it seems produces more meetings:

It makes it easier to meet up with people because, there is less effort involved in writing a small message and sending it out to a number of people in terms of coordination and getting people together. … For instance, when it was my stag do a couple of years ago my best man did it all by email and it worked wonderfully well because you get this kind of coordination of dates when people are available, when they are not … So rather than that kind of confusion that occurs when you are going from one person to another and then going back … you have got this situation where everything is … transmitted to everybody from one source (M, male architect, early thirties).

Text messaging provides some of the same affordances:

Well last week I organised 20 of us to go to a greyhound meeting. I didn’t speak to one person; it was all done by text message. I didn’t speak to one person. I just write a message, sent it all to everyone, I said if you want to come, send me a reply, I’ll book you a ticket. Everyone replied, I booked a ticket and we all turned up and that was it (S, doorman, early twenties).

This flexibility contrasts with telephone calls that are mostly one-to-one (except for conference calls increasingly available through VOIP). Group coordination by ‘phone
talk’ requires a central hub through which all information has to pass so that a single person is in charge of synchronizing busy and fragmented diaries. In most cases this means that the central hub has to call each of the links more than once, making it time consuming and expensive to achieve coordination. So e-mail and text messages distribution lists’ make it easier and cheaper for dispersed networks with highly desynchronised diaries to arrange meetings, compared with one-to-one telephony.

Gibson’s (1979) concept of affordances highlights how technologies enable certain physical actions and resist others. We have discussed how text messages afford collective, non-centralized coordination that make group coordination smoother than one-to-one communication. Yet this neglects how the affordances of objects are context dependent, where they are placed and how they are performed. As one respondent reflects:

‘If you are walking, it is easy to phone. If you are on a train, it’s warm and you don’t have to wear gloves, then it’s easy to text. It’s just where you are at the moment of communicating’ (M, female architect, early thirties)

Communication technologies frame material inscriptions but do not determine how they are corporeally and culturally performed in practice. They are preformed and performed (Larsen 2005).

Places and access matter in relation to email, since they mostly take place at work or at home (not much use of wireless or blackberries). The architects email much and they coordinate their meetings and travel by emails because they have ‘private’ work email addresses, Internet connection and work computers. The rest of the respondents have no such ‘access’ at work and as a result they email less and
prefer mobile phones to coordinate their social life. Email is intermittently performed to communicate with significant others at-a-distance. Much of the architects private emailing takes place at work:

I’ve got Internet access at work … I can use that any time. It’s supposed to be for work but we all use it for other things as well. I’ve got Internet at home but not broadband though … because we have both got Internet at work so we don’t spend too much on it (W, male architect, late twenties).

Despite working in open office landscapes they can do private communication and coordination because emailing - unlike phoning - is covert. A much travelled architect says:

You would be on the phone and people are watching the time you are spending talking…. Whereas with email it is a lot more covert and I think people spend a lot more time on the email, even I do. You know, you are all supposed to be working but you’re all communicating, and you can have a big social event if you like. … At the moment I’m trying to arrange a snowboarding holiday, and there’s about 5 or 6 of us all over the country, and you can have a little chat during the day. It’s almost like you’re down the pub having a bit of a social chat over a beer (K, male architect, early thirties).

While appearing to work he has a ‘big social event’ to organise with dispersed friends who also chat and coordinate while at work. Here the distinction between coordination and meeting blurs as the coordination event itself produces
communicative co-presence to such extent that ‘it’s almost like you’re down the pub having a bit of a social chat over a beer’.

Architects also email to colleagues and workmate and friends ‘around the corner’. Here the clandestine nature of emails is also valued. One explains how he occasionally goes for secret lunches to gossip and discuss office politics with some colleagues. By coordinating them by email no one can hear that they are going, and no one else joins in.

Email has largely substituted for phone calls when it comes to coordinating social life amongst architects:

‘It’s taken over from the telephone definitely, because I don’t take hardly any personal calls in work time, and it would have to be urgent to do that really … It’s the speed at which you can do it, but also again the distribution lists. You don’t have to phone 4 people up. The same information gets to all people at the same time’ (J, female architect, early thirties).

Here email distribution lists are praised again for being flexible, time effective and almost instantaneous, as ‘the same information gets to all people at the same time’. However, email is only instantaneous if people are more or less continuously on-line and respond promptly to messages. The architects continuously check their email account, so each time an arrival is announced they go to the inbox to read to whether it is an interesting email! So many smaller ‘breaks’ during the day are tied into doing one’s private email since ‘good’ email conduct involves quick replies so that communication is reliable.

And coordination by email is only instantaneous when the language of emailing
is fast paced and instrumental, unlike telephone conversations where the exchange of 
pleasantries and personal updates are expected. One architect explain why emailing is 
so effective at coordinating meetings:

You don’t have to talk round it. You can merely put in one line and you get an 
answer back in one line. There’s no talking about how are you. There’s no 
chitchat … whatever is in your head, you type and it’s gone. By the time you’re 
thinking what else you forgot to ask, and replies come back. That’s the beauty of 
email. It is quick. Literally one line, … what are you doing at the weekend? If I 
picked up the phone, I can’t just pick up the phone: “What are you doing at the 
weekend?” I’m going to have to say: “How are you and what have you been up 
to”? And you get into a full conversation (L, male architect, late twenties)

Another says:

… you write emails at the drop of a hat. Like you’ve got 5 minutes to spare. …
“Oh Chris has replied”. Oh I’ve got something to tell him and I’ll just sit down
and type it. You would never have spent 5 minutes “oh what shall I do, I’ll write
a letter. Email is not time consuming. I don’t have to go and put it into an
envelope, buy a stamp, post it, you know … you send a letter and it might come
back 5 days later with a reply. But with an email you can do a one liner and then
2 minutes later even though they are in Egypt they reply. It is more like a
conversation (K, male architect, early thirties).
While e-mail affords ‘timeless’ travel through space, it is only when people make ‘drop of a hat’ or ‘one line’ messages rather than wordy letters and reply promptly that emailing is fast and resemble real time conversations. The fast-paced, flexible nature of much email stems partly from its affordances but also from specific cultures of performance (which are very variable!).

Effective and fast group coordination by email thus requires that all network members email at work or at least check it daily elsewhere. This is particular the case with short-term planning. As this female receptionist from Manchester says:

When I’m living in Devon with my parents, I don’t tend to email my friends that are in the local area because I see them more often and I speak to them on the phone more often. So there’s no need to email. By the time she’s read her email, I’ll have seen her 3 times (J, female receptionist, early twenties).

The architects also email less in the evenings and weekends because few are much online and now they can freely speak on their phone; so they use mobile phones and texts to reach each other instantly.

People without access to email at work find email slow and inconvenient because they are not as ready at-hand as with mobile phones:

[I] use my mobile phone a million times more [than emails]. I just think it’s easier, a lot easier, than logging on and ….you’ve got your phone there, it’s easier to use (N, Sales Manager in Fitness Club, mid-twenties).
The doorman who recently organised a trip for twenty people to go to the greyhound meeting explains why he used text messages rather than emails:

Because I don’t know if they check it [email]. It’s the instant factor of it that I like more than anything, the fact that they get it straight away. They don’t have to go and check their emails and I don’t have to go and check mine to get it back … My phone … beep[s], and I can sort of write down who’s coming … And that’s why I use text messaging, because it’s instant. And my phone is always with me. (S, male doorman, early twenties)

The non-architects in our sample check their email only XXXX times a week, making short-term coordination by email too slow.

Texting can also afford secret gossip and coordination. Many youngish people have developed striking texting skills and with their mobiles ‘on silent’ they text inaudibly in the most unlike places. This ensures that texting is instant:

You can just sort of drop your hand under the desk and… Well I don’t have to look at mine, I can text without looking … [for instance] … I was sat in a lecture. My lecture was about to finish so I said meet me at 1 … by the time I got there he was there (S, male doorman, early twenties).

One female architect reports how her group of friends often only make loose arrangements with regard to time and instead use the mobile phone to announce when they leave and arrange. People make arrangements to call rather than at what time to
meet. This contrast with pre-mobile phones days where fixed appointments were the only choice:

But flexible definitely because sometimes I won’t arrange a time…..I mean obviously a vague like I’ll meet you in there, but then I’d make a text as I get a taxi and say I’ll be there in 10 minutes, whereas in the past you would have to phone earlier in the evening saying I would be there at 7 o’clock (J, female architect, early thirties).

Sometimes mobile phones seem to rule out the need for preceding mail or phone coordinating:

Saturday Liverpool played Manchester United. A whole group of us met up, I’d say probably about 8 of us in the morning. And these people were all coming from different cities … and we’d made no arrangements. I remember thinking that “oh all I know is that they are coming to the match”. So the first sign I hear of anyone going to be in the city is a text message at about half past ten saying we’re in Wetherspoons pub, where are you, because otherwise they could be in any pub, we don’t have a regular place to meet. So I have a text from there, so I get the train into town, other people start getting the same kind of text messages, and before you know it, everyone’s met at the same place. And so without the mobile you would really struggle … So it’s a lot more fluid (M, male architect, early thirties).
So it would be fatal if one were to forget or lose the mobile or if its battery runs out! This illustrates how flexible coordination is fully dependent upon systems and how it would be impossible to be part of this network without a fully functioning mobile phone.

Sometimes coordination also takes place during meetings, when people have already met up in bars and pubs. Some of the respondents (especially the youngest ones) do not ‘go out’ with one group but a larger mobile phone connected network of both strong and weak ties. They text each other about ‘happening’ places, ‘private’ parties and interesting people, and they are likely to meet up with people that they did not go with in the first place:

If I’m in one bar and they’re in another, I might text them and say it’s not very good here, really quiet or really busy, we’ll come….where are you and you’ll go oh I’m in Varsity and it’s really really good. So I’ll go to Varsity then. It’s just like having a constant network between all of you (S, male doorman, early twenties)

Another respondent says:

If I’m out in the pub round here, there’s a good chance that somebody will ring me up from another pub across town, and “say oh yeah we’re having a drink” …or somebody coming into town and wants to meet up with you (K, male architect, early thirties).
So ‘going out’ in such a way involves continuous coordination, negotiation and movement with people who are present as well as (temporally) absent others. This provides opportunities to meet new people and come across what are deemed happening places. Texting is often impromptu and informal, and one text will often be sent to several people. This also enables fluid meeting cultures with recurrent circulating invitations to ‘join in’ (see Hulme, Truch 2004):

It might be like you’re sitting in the office or 5 or 6 offices around Liverpool and say we’re all going out for a drink, do you want to come. And it happens instantaneously sort of thing. It is more manageable because you’ve got that instant communication (K, male architect, early thirties).

With widespread mobile connectivity, there is no need to wait for people to ‘return home’ before an arrangement can be made. Our respondents explain how they often call friends to say that they are in the neighbourhood and ask whether they fancy meeting up for a quick beer or coffee. These respondents seem to have plenty of time for their social life and communications – and thus they receive many invitations for meetings.

Moreover, the ‘impersonal’ and informal nature of text groups messages means that there is less chance of what Goffman calls ‘losing face’ when inviting people out by text or email than by phone and especially in person where there is no time to perform courteous rejections. This also explains why some single respondents highlight that text messages are very good tools for flirting (Oksman and Turtiainen 2004: 326). One architect explains how he recently invited for dinner by email because it would be awkward for both parties if they declined the invitation by phone.
People can be more courageous in who they invite when they can hide behind the informal, collective nature of emails and especially text messages. Granovetter famously showed the strength of weak ties for successful job searches (1983). Mobile phones, with their multi-destination text messages, multiple contacts and informality, means that they are perfect tools for distributing not just jokes and rumours but also causal invitations to ‘join in’ and information about ‘happening’ places. It is much less ‘risky’. ‘Weak ties’ seem to increase dramatically now that mobile phones make it easier to coordinate meetings.

Much meeting coordination involves both email and mobile phones. This is especially the case with long distance travel. Often the initial coordination is by email correspondence with text messages taking over when the journey begins:

It was a long weekend. We do it once a year …. all my friends from back home, we meet up in one place and we do poker nights …. The date was arranged by email but [not] the finer details … when I was coming down, I’d be texting my brother and my friends to say can you pick me up from here. If he can’t do it, I’ll text the next one and so on …. I had to pretty much do it all when I was travelling on the train. So I spent five and a half hours going there, so all the time while I was on the train I was texting and talking. (N, sales advisor, late twenties).

So in many cases there is a clear division of labour between email and mobile phones, a division related to their different affordances and to different performances.

CONCLUSION
The clock time punctuality that Simmel argued coordinated early modern cities and meetings partly dissolves in ‘liquid modernity’ (Bauman, 2003). The clock-time of pocket/wrist watches is increasingly supplemented by a negotiated ‘network’ or fluid time of mobile communications. Now people can not only be on time or running early or late, but also ‘refuse to accept’ clock-time by texting that they are late or suggesting a new place or a later time. While some respondents were annoyed that many people are less bothered about being on time, most agree that people are more relaxed about running late as long as people call or text to say they are behind schedule. ‘I think because everybody carries their mobile with them, it doesn’t matter if you are late for something’ (I, fitness manager, early thirties). There is now it seems less an obligation to be on time; there is an obligation though to inform people if one is going to be late. Whereas coordination was traditionally finalised before the departure, it is now negotiated and performed on the move.

This article has thus shown that transport and communications are complexly folded into each other when people are arranging and making meetings (of many sorts). Transport and communication technologies are thus ‘travel partners’, components of ‘network capital’. We might see this as a process of co-evolution, between new forms of social networking on the one hand, and extensive forms of physical travel, now normally enhanced by new communications, on the other. These sets of processes reinforce and extend each other in ways that are difficult to reverse. This also means that crucial to the character of modern societies is that of ‘network capital’, comprising access to communication technologies, affordable and well-connected transport and safe meeting places. Without sufficient network capital people suffer social exclusion as social networks are more far-flung.
Drawing on Wellman’s notion of networked individualism’, we saw that while there appear to be more individualisation there is simultaneously more dependence upon communicative and transport systems. It is difficult to escape these systems now that communications collectively coordinate flexible social life and visits with significant others normally requiring travel. Human agency and social networks are interwoven with mobile phones, email and cars (Postill, 2002).

We have argued that mobile phones are as symbolic of contemporary modern societies, as pocket watches were when Simmel wrote about Berlin. This transition corresponds with a shift from punctuality to more fluid ‘networked time’ where ‘punctuality’ is negotiated on the move, so that time, venue and group can change with the next email or text. Whereas trains and pocket watches were early modern twins, mobile phones and cars are the late modern ones, raging against past rhythms and timekeeping of early modernity when transport and mediated communication were unconnected. The striking popularity of cars, email and mobile communications are thus significantly tied up with how they afford a flexible and mobile social life, with high network capital, with dispersed and personalised social networks and where coordinated arrangements and travel are necessary for the mundane business of meeting up, for doing social life.
Bibliography


Global Networks 4: 219-224.


