Locating business ethics anywhere: The impact of work-related mobile technologies on ethics and work

This work is in its very early stages. A further development of the ideas presented in this paper will be forthcoming.

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Introduction

Mobile working has been investigated in various ways (see for example Felstead *et al.* 2005; Hislop 2008) and a body of work is emerging on the social aspects of mobile communication technologies (see for example Castells *et al.* 2007; Katz and Aakhus 2002; Katz 2006, 2008; Ling 2004, 2008). What has been more or less absent (with the exception of work by Introna 2002, 2003a, 2003b, 2007) is a consideration of ethics, technology and work, and in particular, mobile work. Mobile work as referred to in this paper involves the act of working in various 'clusters in plural workscapes' (Felstead *et al.* 2005:15). Workscapes are comprised of the total network of workstations (the immediate locations such as a desk or a seat in a train within which work tasks are conducted) and workplaces (physical constructions that contain and support one or more workstations) (Felstead *et al.* 2005). The collective office, working from home, and working 'on the move' form clusters in various combinations which are incorporated into workscapes. A fundamental facilitator of the changed nature of workscapes are mobile technologies, and an exploration of any possible ethical problems of work-related mobile technologies thus forms the basis of this paper[1].

In this paper I posit the view that since much contemporary business activity eliminates spatial and temporal barriers through the use of work-related mobile technologies, then issues associated with ethics and business, *if* at all locatable, may also transcend spatial and temporal barriers. Issues related to business and ethics then may be potentially locatable anywhere (or no-where). Critiquing the notion of Katz and Aakhus's (2002) neologism of the mobile phone as an '*apparatgeist',* I seek here to critically explore ethical problems associated with the perpetual contact afforded by work-related mobile technologies. I am also going to try to use the work of Levinas to make some sense of any associations between ethics, business and mobile work technologies. The paper is structured in four remaining parts. The next section will provide a brief overview and critique of recent literature on socio-technical issues associated with mobile technologies. Following this critique, the notion of ethics and work-related mobile technologies will be explored alongside a discussion of the works of Levinas (1985, 1996, 2007). This discussion in turn provides the framework for exploring a number of ethical 'aches' that can be identified with work-related mobile

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[1] The paper explores potential ethical *associations* of work-related mobile technologies; however, the underlying assumption is not one of technological determinism. The guiding view here is that while technology may have various effects or impacts, technology itself is shaped by social and economic forces (Mackenzie and Wajcman 1985).

technologies and the way they may be used. In the final section, some tentative conclusions are drawn.

Mobile communication technologies: Magic in the air?

It is difficult to find critical research on mobile communication technologies that opens up debate on any possible related ethical dimensions. The vast majority of literature on mobile technologies is based on instrumental research oriented both towards utility and pragmatic results associated with funding and investment. In this way, the mobile technology industry has constructed a seductive promotional discourse advocating a type of communication utopia. As McGuigan (2005) notes, this is unfortunate since there are questions to be asked of mobile technologies. For example, while the mobile phone may extend the sheer volume and extent of communications, what effect does it have on the quality of communication? And what are the ethical implications of the various applications of mobile technologies? How for example, have mobile communication technologies shaped the experience of work? Are there any ethical implications associated with this? These are areas that have not been the topic of inquiry. As the literature reviewed in this section reveals, there is a need for a more critical approach to the study of mobile technologies. Mobile communication technologies may afford some desirable and perceived advantages to its varied users, but on the other hand they may function to *"systemise the life world replacing meanings with messages, consensus with instructions and insight with information"* (Meyerson 2001:65, cited in McGuigan 2005).

Katz (2002, 2006, 2008) is one of the key advocates of the 'communication utopia' brought about by mobile communication technologies. Together with Aakhus (2002) he proposed the theory of *Apparatgeist* to make sense of consistencies in the effects and uses of mobile phones and personal communication technologies[2]. *Apparatgeist* is meant to be the 'spirit of the machine' and refers to a common human orientation to mobile technologies and coherent trends in social transformations. Underlying the *Apparatgeist*, according to Katz and Aakhus (2002:307) is the 'sociologic' of 'perpetual contact'. The core assumption of perpetual contact and the spirit of the *Apparatgeist* is the ideal of *pure communication* which is *"*an idealisation of communication committed to the prospect of sharing one's mind with another, like the *talk of angels* that occurs without the constraints of the body" (Katz and Aakhus 2002:307) [italics added]. Against this claim of the pure communication of angels afforded by mobile technologies it is perhaps not so surprising that Katz's next book in 2006 was titled *Magic in the Air*. Here he makes the claim that mobile technologies are inherently linked to spiritual and transcendent spheres, leading ultimately to a transformation of social life. In a more recent book Katz (2008) further emphasises this possibility afforded by mobile communication technologies as providing the means to transcend the personal physical limits of self and merge with others. He states: "We came to the critical idea that the tools of mobile communication elicit and further develop human feelings about what interpersonal communication should really achieve, namely transcending the personal physical limits of

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2 In their early work Katz and Aarkhus (2002:314) acknowledge the sensitive nature of communication in the context of mobile communication technologies: 'Social actors must constantly perform a series of ever-changing and highly complex social roles. They must also deal with other actors who themselves are performing in a series of ever-changing and highly complex social roles. This in itself represents an uncertain and complex scenario in which communication takes place.' This awareness of the varied needs of all the social actors in a mobile communication scenario appears greatly diminished and mostly absent in subsequent publications.

being human." (p. 442). Here in this later work, the metaphor of pure *angelic* communication is still evident:

> "Mobile communication offers the tantalising prospect of crossing the boundary of individual barriers to merge the self with a higher sense of place and group…Or, in Ernest Becker's evocative terminology, they could set free the *angel bound in heavy armor* …"

Katz (2008:442)

These are peculiarly grand, if heavily metaphoric, claims. What is disturbing to me is the idea that mobile technologies somehow take us out of the realm of being human, or at least physically human, and that transcendence of the self is assumed to occur through communication with *virtual* others and virtual groups or communities. How does this occur?

In the context of non-mobile technology communications, people in close physical proximity clearly experience tensions and misunderstandings of communication. It is hard to see how these tensions and misunderstandings can be ameliorated or removed in the context of mobile technology communications – indeed, it is easy to see how these tensions and misunderstandings would be exacerbated due to a 'crossing of the boundary' with mobile technologies?

Rather than highlight the nature of 'merging the self with any other' the general theme running through much of the literature on mobile technologies has an implicit assumption of individualisation, despite the paradoxical fascination with communication – which, of course, implies more than one individual. As Ling (2004) admits, instead of the coalescing of social groups, mobile technologies allow "a centrifugal tendency and the push toward atomization" (p. 179). In the case of mobile technologies such as the mobile phone for example, there is an inevitable tension associated with either making or receiving calls. It is the latter that is usually seen as most problematic since it is potentially the most disruptive (to the receiver at least). Palen *et al.* (2000) highlight the self-centred problematic decision-making evoked by receiving calls:

> "When mobile phone users are on the phone, they are simultaneously in two spaces; the space they physically occupy, and the virtual space of the conversation (the conversational space). When a phone call comes in the user decides, consciously or otherwise, what face takes precedence: the face that is consonant with one's physical environment, or that of the conversational space? The greater the conflict between the behavioural requirements of the two spaces, the more conscious, explicit and difficult this decision might be."

(Palen *et al.* 2000:209)

In this case it is the receiver who is seen to face a tension and a decision - I would call this more a calculation. But what of the others who inhabit the same physical space? Ling (2004:133) describes the process thus:

- The called on withdraws from the immediate physical context and puts themselves in a type of virtual context and initiates a greeting sequence.

- Co-present others go through a parallel withdrawal procedure and partition off the telephonist.

- These various actors have a defensive stance in that they wish to retain their own façade and to protect the façade of the others present.

All of this rearranging of the social furniture has to take place within a few seconds. Thus, there are many opportunities to offend sensibilities in this short time period (Ling 2004).

Rather than lead to a 'pure communication', the perpetual contact afforded by mobile technologies means we are at times forced to individualise and bracket our communication (insider/outsider) in ways that bring about a type of interactional malaise This individualisation and interactional malaise are evident in the quality of our communications. Rather than the 'pure' communication promised by perpetual contact, we witness regular violations of what could be considered civil (let alone angelic) communication. Consider these scenarios: (1) You are seemingly engaged in conversation with a friend or colleague when they suddenly take out their mobile phone and start texting, giving a quick cursory apology and then occasionally looking at you as if they are actually listening, or (2) you are presenting a paper at an academic conference and many of the people in the room have their lap-tops open and are scrolling or tapping away while nodding sagely as if heeding your every word. Gergen's (2002) notion of 'absent presence', where people are seemingly at an event or socially engaged but their attention and mental focus is elsewhere has become all too familiar. Violations of quality communication through self-interest are of course not confined to either private or public domains. Our highly individualised and typically disruptive usage of mobile technologies blurs the boundaries between private and public domains. We have become accustomed to place polygamy and adept at building what Goffman (1971) refers to as 'symbolic fences'. Ling goes on:

> "[Mobile communication devices] clash with many social situations, particularly those governed by a heightened sense of normative expectations. To understand this, it is important to see that buses, public spaces and particularly restaurants are simultaneously public and private spaces. While a person is in the public domain, tables, booths, bus seats, and park benches become the 'property' of the individual for the period of occupancy. To claim a territory, however we must go through the rituals of establishing and agreeing on illusory perimeters…we become quite accomplished at ignoring others who are in quite close proximity, through the use of fictive curtains."

(Ling 2004:125-126)

Katz (2008:441) is, as ever, optimistic that such public and potentially disruptive communication is in some way pure enough for us to become accustomed to its intrusiveness. This he argues, is because of the "*irresistible sweetness* of using the technology and the fact that over time people become inured to such practices" (Katz 2008:441) (italics added). And so, we find ourselves with the stranger as anonymous co-traveller, who speaks (not *to* us in presence) about intimate matters through the use of their mobile phone in a public place. Intimacy, in the realm of the social negotiation of communication, is profoundly linked to individual freedom and decision-making. But, as Fortunati (2002) notes, when it is made public and imposed on those around without their prior assent and involvement "the extra freedom on the part of the speaker is taken away from those who are obliged to listen because of their proximity, often against their own will"

(Fortunati 2002:50). In other words, bystanders are forced into a listening situation that has not been mutually negotiated in any sense.

This section has attempted to highlight the increasing individualisation of our communications and the role that mobile communication technologies play in this paradoxical process of the atomisation of communication. In the next section I attempt to outline a framework of 'ethical possibility' (or impossibility) that will in turn shed some light on why mobile communication technologies in the context of mobile work present us with an ethical 'ache'.

Ethical Possibilities and Levinas

In trying to understand what ethics may mean or involve, especially within the economic sphere of work, I try to make use here of the work of Levinas (1985, 1996, 2007) and his concept of the Other. To Levinas, ethics is a *possibility* that can only be awakened and made manifest as a response to a call from the (unique) Other. In its simplest meaning, ethics is the process of acting out of the realm of our own (identified) self-interest and acknowledging the needs of the Other, moreover, setting the interests of the Other before oneself.

For Levinas, responsibility is a fundamental structure of subjectivity, a subjectivity rooted in ethics. He states: "I understand responsibility as responsibility for the Other, thus as responsibility for what is not my deed, or for what does not even matter to me; or which precisely does matter to me, is met by me as face" (Levinas 1985:95). At first paradoxically, tied in with this concept of responsibility is the notion of freedom. For Levinas, freedom would be impossible without responsibility. Responsibility is fundamental because we can only discover our freedom if responsibilities demand it of us, and we could not be responsible if we lacked the agency to be so – "…to be I signifies not being able to escape responsibility" (Levinas 1996:17).

Further, Levinas suggests that on answering the call of the Other we can no longer set the Other first without simultaneously setting all other others aside. Hence we must take into consideration *the third*, *the fourth*, and all the other Others (in other words, society). The way that this prioritising of others is met is through striving for *justice,* not for the sake of the Other but for the sakes of the others – i.e. all others. It is in this suggestion of our encounter with *the third*, and the role of justice, that the economy becomes an important feature of what Levinas considers to be the *possibility of expressing ethics*. As Aasland (2009:71) elegantly observes in his essay on Levinas:

> "It is not only a fact that ethics is necessary for the economy. Economy is also necessary for ethics. Just as a house may be a concrete security for a loan, the economy is a concrete security for ethics. Without economic goods and needs and the accompanying knowledge *for myself*, there would be no need for ethics. An ethics *for the other* can only be expressed as long as the other has specific needs competing with mine. Only then can I act for the other *instead of* acting for myself, and thus set the needs of the other before those of me. Or, put in another way: angels do not need ethics, because they have no needs and thus no need to help each other."

(Aasland 2009:71)

You may have noticed that angels have appeared yet again. But these are far less bound or needy than the ones proposed by Katz and Aarkhus (2002). And this location of the possibility of ethical expression within an economic domain brings us a little closer to an examination of the possibility of locating ethical actions/intentions within the context of work and communication (through our encounter with the Other, the third, and so on), and more specifically for purposes here, the particular case of technologically mediated communication such as mobile communication technology.

Another means of grounding the ensuing discussion is through the Kafkaesque concept of 'moral distance' (Bauman 1989). Moral distance is the idea that organisations may provide a fertile ground to ignore the responsibility associated with the encounter with the Other through organising a chain of distant (geographical and/or hierarchical) relationships which serve to dispose of the essence of the very relationships which make them possible (Jones *et al.* 2005). And so, people who are never met or encountered are more likely to become objectified. The call of the Others becomes a mere possibility of opportunities lost or ignored, the remains of echoes quietened by distance.

Ethics, Mobile Working and Mobile Communication Technologies

But what has all of the above discussion got to do with mobile workers and their technologically mediated communication? As discussed above, and drawing on Felstead, it appears that mobile work involves the act of working in various 'clusters in plural workscapes'. Workscapes are comprised of the total network of workstations (the immediate locations such as a desk or a seat in a train within which work tasks are conducted) and workplaces (physical constructions that contain and support one or more workstations The collective office, working from home, and working 'on the move' thus form clusters in various combinations which can be incorporated into workscapes. Mobile technologies affording the feature of perpetual contact are a key factor underpinning the advent of plural workscapes.

A feature of perpetual contact related to the adoption of work-related mobile communication technologies is the market driven thirst for knowledge (and associated powers) coupled with the promotional discourse of the mobile technology industry advocating a type of 'communication utopia'. But we have seen how this utopia could be considered a dystopian fiction. Instead of the 'pure communication' of perpetual contact proposed by Katz and Aarkhus (2002) we have started to legitimise an individualised and atomistic mode of mobile communications. In an ether of self interest we run the risk of not encountering the call of the Others. So, how does this play out in new forms of working such as in the case of mobile workers and their organisation? And what are the implications for the possibility of ethics and justice in the case of mobile workers? When we consider the nature of mobile work and the role played by mobile communication technologies, and when the supposed benefits for organisations and employees are put under scrutiny, there are potential and subtle 'ethical cracks' which start to emerge.

These ethical cracks can be detected in the contemporary discourse about 'good jobs' and 'bad jobs' and the characterisation of the former as high-skilled, flexible and mobile jobs (through the use of work-related mobile technologies), hence almost bespoke to suit the individual, and characterised by a new type of economic actor, the 'digerati' (Fisher 2008). On the one hand, work-related mobile technologies may afford some desirable and perceived power vantages to its varied users, but on the other hand they may, as Meyerson (2001) articulates, function to "systemise the life world replacing meanings with messages,

consensus with instructions and insight with information" (p. 65). Our communications have become less interactive, less human in some way.

It is proposed here that the type of perpetual contact facilitated by work-related mobile technologies may force us, through the *opportunity* of perpetual contact with the Others, to a point of reflexive responsibility for all Others. Yet, how this reflexive responsibility is acted out in organisations is altogether unclear if we turn to consider the ways in which our usage of mobile technologies is shaping the workscapes of mobile working. For purposes here, three potential ethical problems of mobile working will be outlined, all of which illustrate the potential neglect of consideration for any 'infinite embrace of the Other' (Lim 2007). In the following discussion I am not *applying* Levinas to solve any ethical issues associated with mobile working, rather I am using Levinas to understand how ethical acts/intentions may or may not be locatable and the possibility or impossibility of encountering the Others ethically in the contexts of mobile working and the use of mobile technologies.

Mobile working, boundaries and surveillance

As Felstead *et al.* (2005) note, working in collective offices, at home, or on the move, are all associated with increased surveillance of various kinds. In the collective office, characterised by an absence of personal space, we have the 'gold-fish bowl' effect, the polyopticon replacing the panopticon. Surveillance associated with working from home and/or on the move is typically achieved through routinised monitoring via mobile technologies. In this way, work-related mobile technologies communications may lead to increased intercept and surveillance facilitating a violation of the protective space of the private. Thus, while mobile technologies may bind workers through the continuity of spatial networks, they are also likely to facilitate unwarranted identity anxiety by invasion into the private domain. It is not only privacy that may be violated, but worker discretion also, since another feature of surveillance is its use as a form of performance monitoring outside the realm of workplace related observation and traditional modes of performance management. In these technologically-mediated monitoring activities, the possibility of encountering the Other (as a face) is silenced, in other words, the possibility of acting ethically, is denied. As Introna (2003) succinctly states:

> "...the ethics of surveillance is impossible and that is its force. It is this that will unsettle the certainty of our comparisons and judgements and then maybe, just maybe, ethics will happen. I am suggesting, with Levinas, that the working out of ethics and justice in everyday workplace surveillance practices starts by accepting that they are unethical and unfair, from the start, as such. It is exactly with such radical position that its possibility begins rather than ends."

(Introna 2003:215)

Mobile working and organisation

A paradox of perpetual contact may be that despite an apparent fluidity of organisational structures afforded by networked organisations, a preservation of power relationships is rendered possible. The accepted ethos of perpetual contact may serve to preserve traditional patriarchal leadership roles and power structures by managers themselves remaining 'on duty' (instead of delegating responsibilities) thus inhibiting processes of organisational

differentiation and *distribution.* Perpetual contact thus potentially serves to substitute for traditional training and development efforts and the associated promotional opportunities and skills gains for aspiring workers Again, in this way we are forced to examine the possibility of the (non)encounter with the Other and our responsibility to them in terms of how justice, in the form of multiple recognitions (or rewards), may be possible.

Mobile working and (non)social working

Work-related mobile technologies have contributed to a refashioning of spaces of work to become ever shifting, detached, unpredictable and placeless. The placelessness of work potentially de-personalises work processes and social interactions and is thus likely to deprive workers of a means to enjoy any regularity of (literal) face-to-face contact, or to flourish socially. The paradox of perpetual contact in the context of the world of work and its associated mobile technologies is that meaningful social interactions (especially for workers 'on the move' and always in transitional spaces), either as embedded in the work undertaken or as a welcome by-product, become unlikely. This forces us to understand the ethics of working in always new public spaces, since the public that constitute the public spaces are always shifting strangers. Crucially here, the demands of work mean that a form of 'civil inattention' (Goffman 1971) in transitional work spaces is required. The questions then to be asked in this case are how are mobile workers, reliant on the use of mobile communication technologies in both private and public domains, expected to continually construct the fictive curtain or to ignore each presence (in time) of the 'innocent bystander'? How can the call of the Others be answered in this way? How may our responsibility for the Others take root in such practice?

Conclusion

Mobile work as referred to in this paper involves the act of working in various 'clusters in plural workscapes'. The collective office, working from home, and working 'on the move' form clusters in various combinations which are incorporated into workscapes. Mobile working has been investigated in various ways, and a body of work is emerging on the social aspects of mobile communication. A fundamental facilitator of the changed nature of workscapes are mobile technologies, and an exploration of any possible ethical associations of work-related mobile technologies has formed the basis of this paper. A brief overview and critique of recent literature on socio-technical issues associated with mobile technologies was outlined, followed by a modest outline of some of the main points of Levinas, ethics, and the notion of the Other. Against this backdrop a number of ethical 'aches' were identified with work-related mobile technologies and the way they may be used, in particular, ethical 'aches' associated with surveillance, lack of recognition and a denying of the opportunity to flourish socially. It was then proposed that the type of perpetual contact facilitated by work-related mobile technologies may force us, through the *opportunity* of perpetual contact with the Other, and the third, and the fourth and so on, to a point of reflexive responsibility for all others. Yet, how this reflexive responsibility is acted out in work organisations is altogether vexed if we turn to consider the ways in which our usage of mobile technologies are shaping the workscapes of mobile working. To conclude, 'business ethics' *may* be anywhere, yet also nowhere.

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