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## The role of interspace in sustaining identity

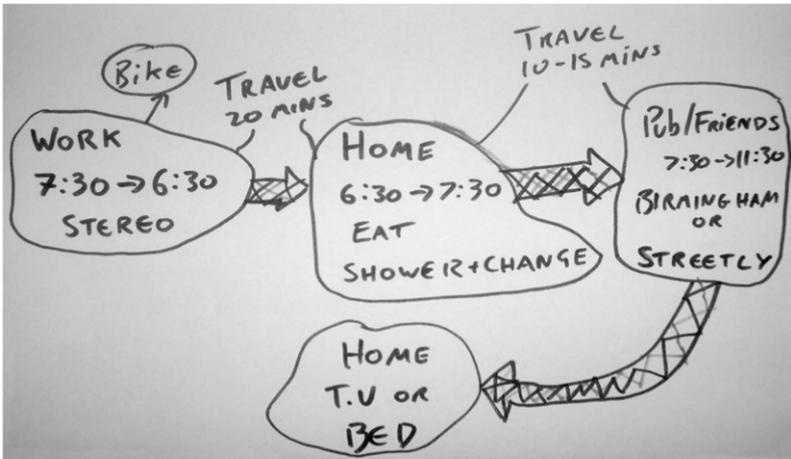
MICHAEL HULME AND ANNA TRUCH

### What is interspace?

The term 'interspace' was defined as a result of the interpretation of a large-scale empirical qualitative and quantitative longitudinal study into mobile device usage and behaviours undertaken by the social research company Teleconomy in the UK and entitled 'Me, My Mobile and I'. The study has been conducted on an annual basis from 2000 to 2004 inclusive. The term was initially used to refer to the period which occurs between two separate but related events which are specifically located in space and time (Hulme 2004). This can refer to either the travel time between two events (e.g. home and work in the morning) or between the arrangement of a meeting (e.g. occurring on a Wednesday) and the meeting itself (e.g. occurring on the following Friday).

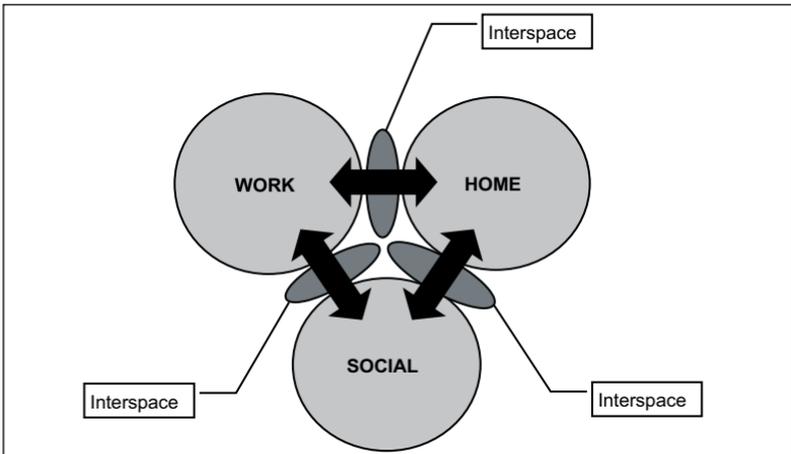
The importance and prevalence of interspace in everyday life is illustrated by Figure 1 in which an interviewee has drawn how and where they spend their time on a typical day (interviewees were not guided in their use of terms and were not instructed to define travel times, they were asked to define in drawing how they spent their time on a typical day). Notice the bounded ("20/10-15 mins") travel time emphasised between the main activities of the day. Over the whole sample there was also found to be a direct correlation to the 'balance' of work, home and social space/time (most individuals elected for these three spatial divisions) and travel and mobile phone use. The more balanced an individual's time was between the three broad space areas and the more the individual's travel time increased, the more their mobile phone use increased. This was subsequently interpreted as an indication of contention and struggle between 'fields', the need for 'active' maintenance, with moments of transit, or interspace, representing vital periods of active re-structuring (see later).

Figure 1: The 'typical day' of an interviewee.



The initial conceptualisation of interspace, therefore, views interspace not as an 'event' in itself but as a 'transit' zone between two events. Figure 2 shows the conceptualisation of interspace as the transit zones between three main event environments which consistently appeared over the course of the research—work, home, and social environments.

Figure 2: Interspace as the space between work, home, and social places.



Following empirical research investigating mobile phone behaviour carried out by Teleconomy (Me, My Mobile, and I; version 2, 2003), the concept of interspace was revisited in 2004. It had become clear that

the concept of interspace is greater than the initial conceptualisation; it holds more importance than the mere transition zone between two events.

Examination of the data indicated that some form of social field theory might provide useful insights for exploration. In particular Bourdieu's concepts of 'field' and 'habitus' were found to be useful in exploring and explaining the dynamics of interspace and the surrounding events seen in the empirical research.

### **'Field' and 'habitus'**

Bourdieu used these concepts to consider social practice in the everyday lives of individuals. He maintains that 'fields represent a social space or arena within which struggles or manoeuvres take place over specific resources or stakes and access to them' (Jenkins 2002). The event environments shown in Figure 2 provide effective examples of 'fields'.

In perhaps one of his most succinct definitions of habitus, Bourdieu (1990) defines habitus as 'a system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is as principles which generate and organise practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them'. Habitus allows the regulation of behaviour without the strict adherence to a set of rules, thereby allowing individuals to maintain their own patterns of behaviour within social practices. Habitus also provides the links between different fields, which are, according to Bourdieu (1993), subject to 'invariant laws' or 'structural mechanisms'. He states that habitus is the 'unifying principle of practices in different domains' (1977).

### **A reconceptualisation of interspace using habitus**

Beyond being a mere transition zone, interspace can be seen to have sociomateriality: 'sociomaterial space is the medium in which people act, intersect, move and locate themselves' (Freund & Martin 2001). At the same time, as a 'space between spaces' it can be seen to 'represent a boundary between fields in which struggle for dominance and maintenance of field integrity takes place' (Hulme 2004); in this way, it represents a space where subjective habitus emerges and supercedes any class habitus.

Interspace is therefore re-conceptualised as a 'space/time' environment in itself which consists of highly complex processes which are

primarily concerned with the organisation of and negotiation between the boundaries of surrounding fields. The empirical research has even led to the conclusion that the interspace between two events could be more important than the actual events. This chapter explores these processes that occur in interspace and their importance.

### **Complexity introduced by the mobile phone**

The longitudinal research study *Me, My Mobile, and I* (Teleconomy 2001-4), has shown that the space/time zone of interspace has become increasingly populated. The use of SMS and voice calls in interspace has been rising rapidly.

Before the introduction of the mobile phone, the use of time was defined by location of an individual (Geser 2003; Fortunati 2002). The regulation of communication between an individual and their social network was originally governed by physical disconnection. Fortunati (2002) holds that these are times of physical disconnection, 'these moments of pause, which were very precious, structured the network of relations inside a rhythm of presence/absence'.

With the introduction of the mobile phone, communication has been abstracted from the constraints of physical space—people can be reached anytime, anyplace:

*"In a very general way, cell phones introduce an element of entropy into all locational social orders, because they permeate them with communicative relationships which transcend system boundaries in highly heterogeneous and unpredictable ways."* (Geser 2003)

People can stay in touch on the move, maintaining a 'nomadic intimacy' (Fortunati 2002). The social world has become a system of networked communities which are held together not by place, but by 'symbolic processes' such as trust building (Nyiri 2003). Communication and boundaries have become much more fluid. The result of this is that while people are physically in one place playing one role, they can be forced into another role in the same physical space, by a mobile call from someone from another context. Meyrowitz (1985) suggests that this presents a violation of the boundaries of place (physical space) and that this changes the social significance of where we are:

*"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 and they can never let it go because it is their primary link to the temporally, spatially frag-*

mented network of friends and colleagues they have constructed for themselves.” (Townsend 2000)

In summary, a consequence of the mobile phone is that the layout, along the time axis, of activities and the roles with which they are associated, has become overlapping and unpredictable—simultaneity has replaced linearity.

### **Impact of the mobile phone on interspace**

Translated into the terms of Bourdieu, the introduction of the mobile phone has added a dimension of complexity to the layout of fields and therefore the nature of interspace. As a result of people being contactable anytime, anyplace, the boundaries between fields have begun to merge and become less defined. The mobile phone has transformed the nature of interspace by allowing communication with other non-present people whilst in transit.

It is here that the initial conceptualisation of interspace becomes inadequate. Instead of being merely a ‘transition zone’, where fields in themselves do not exist, interspace becomes a space in which many fields can be seen to overlap; interspace can be seen as a space in which there is ongoing struggle amongst the surrounding fields for dominance and continued integrity. Within interspace there is a continual defining and redefining of boundary limits by means of constant ‘conservation, succession, and subversion’ (to use Bourdieu’s terms). It can be seen that although interspace does not have the structure of a field itself, its ‘topography’, overseen by the subjective habitus, reflects the dominant fields within the space.

The configuration of interspace is influenced by the dominance of the surrounding fields. A number of factors are likely to influence the relative dominance of existing fields at any time. Belk (1975) provides a set of situational variables which are likely to have an influence:

#### *Physical setting*

- Geographical and/or institutional location and also the environment in which communication is received/sent.

#### *Social setting*

- Presence or absence of other plus social role and interaction.

#### *Temporal perspective*

- Time of day, time constraints, or other proximal issues such as date relative to another significant event.

*Task definition*

- Cognitive and emotional elements, situational influences upon the task, and nature of the task.

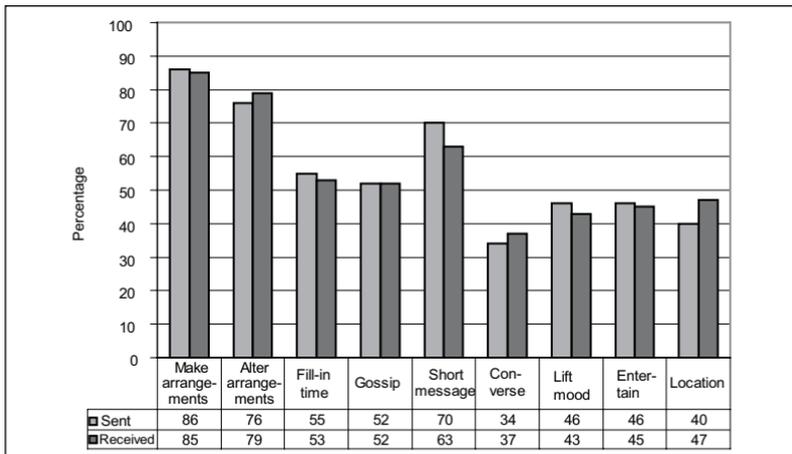
*Antecedent states*

- What the individual brings to the space, in terms of mood-related behaviours, knowledge, etc.

The introduction of mobile phones has perhaps also allowed more opportunity for the management of fields e.g. arranging social events by SMS while in a work environment. This presents a paradigm shift where the movement is from the need to be in a specific physical location to manage a particular field to the ability to manage any field from within any other field. This ability to manage fields from within other fields presents detachment of field boundaries from specific physical locations. This has at the same time however, introduced an element of 'entropy' (Geser 2003) and increased the complexity of the nature of interspace. With the occurrence of increasing fluidity of boundaries, a more conscious approach to field management is required in order to maintain the integrity of the boundaries separating them. This is where the role of interspace has become more pronounced.

Evidence of the use of the mobile phone in interspace is substantial. The use of interspace is demonstrated by data collected as part of the Me, My Mobile, and I research (version 3, 2003) which shows the major categories of SMS and voice call content (see Figures 3 and 4).

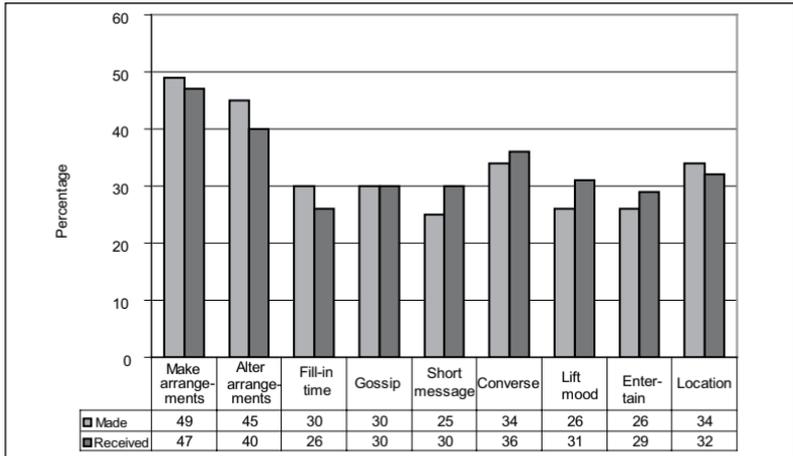
Figure 3: Content of SMS sent and received.



The making and altering of arrangements demonstrates the management of field boundaries whilst situated in interspace.

As will be seen in the following discussion, the maintenance of field boundaries is crucial for sustaining the social identity of an individual.

Figure 4: Content of voice calls made and received.



### Social identity

Each individual has their own personal identity, that which they refer to as 'I'; each individual also has a set of social identities, conceptualisations of them that are held by other people. James (1892) made the following statement with regard to social identities: 'A man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognise him and carry an image of him in their mind' (which he later amended to 'there are as many social selves as groups of individuals who know him'). [It is important to note that this 'multiplicity of self' is merely a metaphor as social identity is about an individual's attributes i.e. the unity of the 'actual self' is not questioned.] Social identities can, to a certain extent, be managed by individuals. They can choose aspects which are to be presented to the external world.

Before mobile phones, social identities were generally location-based. The social identity that is being portrayed at any particular point in time depends largely on the specific environment (field) in which the individual is placed and also upon whom they are with. For instance, if they are at home, they are likely to be maintaining the social identity of parent or spouse because they are with their families; equally, if they are at work, they are likely to be maintaining the social identity of man-

ager because they are with their work colleagues. Each role or identity was closely linked with the surrounding physical environment and the co-located company. To a certain extent, the telephone began to change this, although it was initially immobile and located in a particular place. Therefore if someone answers the telephone, it will be generally clear to the caller and to the individual themselves, which social identity they are maintaining at that moment in time. Conversations will then continue accordingly.

With the introduction of the mobile phone however, it is not immediately obvious to the caller where the individual is located when they call. Equally, the individual does not know which of their social identities will be called upon at any time, given that anyone, from any area of their life, can theoretically contact them via mobile phone at any time. Because of the general relation of a social identity to a particular field, in the same way that boundaries between fields have become increasingly fluid, social identity boundaries have also become much more flexible.

The uncertainty that accompanies this flexibility in social identity boundaries can cause tremendous stress for the individual—with the ‘anytime, anyplace’ nature of the mobile, it is impossible to predict which ‘social identity’ will be required in the next moment—and also for those around them—the incongruity between behaviours ‘on’ and ‘off’ the phone can cause difficulties for co-located individuals who generally have a unitary image of that individual (Truch & Hulme 2004).

However, along with the increasing flexibility of boundaries between social identities, instigated by the introduction of the mobile phone, the mobile also provides a means of creating and maintaining these boundaries. This is where interspace comes into play—it provides the space for individuals to organise and maintain their identities and reflect upon how they want to present themselves to the world.

### **The maintenance of identities in interspace**

The management of field boundaries within interspace can be conscious although the decisions made are more likely to be unconscious. Interspace can be used to sustain identity in a number of ways.

Firstly, interspace provides an opportunity to add depth to past and future events. In this way, the social identity of an individual within a particular field can be strengthened. If an individual is spending their time on the train to work in the morning by sending SMS to their social network, this ensures that they are strengthening their identity within that social field. This is an example of the struggle between fields within interspace—in this case, the particular social field main-

tains its dominance, whereas the work field, into which the individual could also be connecting but chooses not to, loses its influence on the topography of interspace at that time.

Secondly, the 'creation' and maintenance of social identity, sometimes called 'impression management', can now occur across a number of modes—face-to-face, SMS, voice call, email; this adds richness to the identity itself and perhaps strengthens it in a way not possible using only one channel of communication (Daft & Lengel 1984).

Thirdly, the ability to contact the social network while on the move can serve the vital function of reconfirming an individual's identity. As Thoits (1989) states 'psychological wellbeing comes from confirmation of identity'. As Weigert et al. (1986) maintain, it is through the examination of the individual's social relationships that the relevance of the individual's identity in that field is revealed. Heidegger (1962) also maintains that it is through using the world as a mirror that individuals receive feedback through which they are able to understand themselves and their relationships to the external world. Thus, through the feedback received from social contacts, an individual can reflect upon their identity and maintain it to a level which will promote psychological well-being. Interspace offers the opportunity for this feedback to be requested at most times.

Fourthly, the detachment of field and social identity from physical location can have a number of implications. The maintenance of identity remains possible with a reduced need to travel: 'Using my phone means I can cut down on travelling. Instead I'll text to bring people to me.' (Male, 29, Manchester)

The ability to communicate whilst in interspace, and unattached to any significant particular physical location, potentially allows the creation of identities totally unrelated to any physical location; for instance, the creation of totally virtual identity is possible through mobile communities, a phenomenon especially popular in Japan. The creation of new fields becomes possible in what used to be interspace.

## Conclusion

Development of the concept of interspace through empirical research and the application of the theory of Bourdieu, has allowed the development of an understanding of the use of mobile phones and the sustenance of identity in 'the new real estate'. Interspace is viewed as an environment in which complex processes concerned with the maintenance, structuring and re-structuring of field boundaries take place. Alongside the maintenance of these field boundaries, the boundaries of social identities are challenged, managed and maintained. Mobile phones have led to an intensification of the flexibility of boundaries

and the resultant 'entropy' in interspace. As such mobile devices can be seen as both maintainers of boundaries and new creators of boundary tensions, out of these tensions emerge opportunities for both maintenance and the exploration of new ways of developing and creating social identities.

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