MOVING DATA

MOVING DATA

THE iPHONE AND THE FUTURE OF MEDIA

Edited by Pelle Snickars
& Patrick Vonderau

NEW YORK COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS
Publishers Since 1893
New York Chichester, West Sussex
cup.columbia.edu

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
{to come}

Columbia University Press books are printed on permanent and durable acid-free paper.
This book is printed on paper with recycled content.

Printed in the United States of America

c 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
p 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

References to Internet Web sites (URLs) were accurate at the time of writing.
Neither the author nor Columbia University Press is responsible for URLs that may have expired or changed since the manuscript was prepared.

CHAPTER 22

The End of Solitude

DALTON CONLEY

When I was eighteen, I did what many middle-class American college students have done as a rite of passage ever since air travel became accessible to a broad cross-section of the public: I backpacked through Europe on a rail pass. Much cheap wine was consumed. Many hard-earned savings were spent at discotheques. My buddies and I spent most of the time together, but on occasion we split up to travel through different cities with plans to rendezvous back together in northern Italy—at a particular American Express office where we would leave messages.

During my time alone, I slept on the beach in Spain, in a public park in Genova, and on the marble floor of the fascist-built Milan train station. I read Dostoevsky. Most of the time I was on my own, I was miserable. I self-consciously hurried through meals. I sat in public parks and wrote in my journal. And I only occasionally made new acquaintances at the hostels. Meanwhile, I spoke to my parents perhaps once a week—at most—from the cabin of a public phone bank. I hurriedly told them I was alive and made sure everyone back home was, too. The whole conversation took less than five minutes and that was pretty much it when it came to communication. After all, there were better things to spend my money on.

The first day I arrived—in Paris—I stood in a patisserie, my stomach grumbling, as person after person ordered their baked goods, while I practiced my

request in my head—"Je voudrais un baguette s'il vous plait . . . Je voudrais un baguette s'il vous plait . . ."—over and over, until finally, I swallowed and spoke the words aloud—but not loud enough, evidently, since I was ignored in favor of other patrons. It took twice as long for me to try again—since it took twice the courage to speak up even louder. Again I was ignored. I finally gave up and slunk out of the shop. To my back, I heard the baker shout: "Je voudrais *une* baguette! *Une*! C'est feminine, la baguette!"

It was the most powerful French lesson I would ever endure—complete with the Pavlovian reward of the delicious, still warm loaf of bread. How was I to know the sex of a baguette? I had no iPhone translation app to tell me that "baguette" was feminine. There was no Google to google. And I was alone.

My story is by no means unique. The American version of the aboriginal "walkabout" has long been a rite of passage in our culture of rugged individualism. It may be summer in Europe. Or it could be a hike on the Appalachian Trail or a bike trip down the coast. It doesn't matter how far you go, just as long as you disconnect, cut the umbilical cord, get lost, and have stories to tell your kids someday (edited for public consumption, of course, and perhaps exaggerated just a tad). Whether physically alone on the side of a mountain or psychically alone in a the public square of a new city, time away from our social networks is necessary to figure out who we are, review and process the social interactions we have experienced, create and innovate, and even become fully individual.

But, as of late, this tradition of finding ourselves in the social wilderness is being eroded by omnipresent connectivity—a.k.a the mobile telecommunications device. Without time to be disconnected, the great American tradition of individualism will wither. Without solitude, we will be, ironically, less connected to our intimate relations and families. Without loneliness, our society will innovate and create less. While collaboration is often important to creativity, so is solo incubation and processing time. After all, necessity may be the mother of invention, but boredom is its father.

This tradition of "finding ourselves" in the vast American landscape by losing our social network ties for a while extends all the way back to Thoreau and Walden Pond. In fact, the pastoral tradition—the romanticization of the lone shepherd; the revitalizing influence of losing ourselves in a natural landscape—goes all the way back to Virgil, the great Roman poet, though it should be said that America as a new, uncivilized continent played a special role in this myth's story line. The cultural critic Leo Marx tells us that America was, on the one hand, a Garden of Eden where the fruits of the Earth

abounded and life was idyllic. But, he argues, in his 1960 classic *The Machine in the Garden*, it was simultaneously the forbidding jungle full of dangerous savages, where the comforts of civilization were lacking.

Thomas Jefferson, it seems, was so taken by the imagery of the yeoman farmer, functioning independently, needing nothing but his own plot of land, that his entire vision of a functioning democracy rested on the notion of the individual (white, male) farmer tending his garden alone, coming to the public square only occasionally (and reluctantly) to do the nation's business—again, harking back to Roman imagery, in this case Cincinnatus and his plow. Forty acres and a mule (and a plow) were all a man needed for self-reliance—that is, subsistence farming. This formula became the basis of radical Republican cries for "forty acres and a mule" as reparations to make the former slaves truly free and whole during the early postwar years of Reconstruction. Individual self-sufficiency was still seen as key to liberty. Alas, it was not to come to pass; the dependency relations of sharecropping would become the dominant form of economic life for most black Americans of the late nineteenth century. Common to Virgil's lone shepherd, the American farmer, the Western cowboy, and even the college backpacker was the notion that he was one place—in the pastoral landscape—and civilization was somewhere else. Then in 1829, Leo Marx tells us, everything changed.

The locomotive, which had first been deployed in 1829 in the United States, did more than link cities across the North American expanse. The railroad brought the city into the pastoral—the machine into the garden, so to speak. By 1844, Nathaniel Hawthorne finds his solitude in Sleepy Hollow—not far from Walden Pond—rudely disrupted by a train whistle, which, in turn, conjures images of sweaty urban businessmen; coal shovelers; and various other unpleasant associations of civilization. He cannot escape; his solitude has been shattered.

The consequences of railroads—from the need for standardized time keeping to the stitching together of regions into a national identity—have been well documented elsewhere. Here, I introduce the railroad as only the first step along an almost 200-year path to the iPhone and the almost complete erasure of solitude and its associated virtues. Whereas the railroad merely reminded Hawthorne of "that other place" teeming with people (and, of course, allowed some of those people to escape the Dickensian cities of industrializing America), the telegraph and telephone socially connected the garden and the city in real time.

At least those technologies required a physical wire. The metaphoric importance of the telephone wire lay in the explicitness of the connection—like

two cans and a piece of string—between the social cacophony of the city and the solitude of the countryside. By liberating us from the wire, mobile phone and WiFi technology has, in a sense, collapsed space in a qualitatively distinct way. We can, of course, be anywhere; the distance from our interlocutor is no longer of much importance—the way it was when in the 1980s I called my grandparents from California on a scratchy, transcontinental line. Now what matters is how far the conversers are from their cell phone towers. Yes, there are still dead spots in North America, but not for much longer. More importantly, the expectation that we carry our phone numbers on our person at almost all times—and especially when we travel to some remote place where we fear getting a flat tire—means that we can never truly be alone. Bye, bye solitude. Bye, bye individualism.

Solitude and individualism do not just go together for political and economic reasons, however. Solitude, ironically, is what is necessary not just for individualism but also for intimacy. Allow me to elaborate. The early-twentieth-century social psychologist George Herbert Mead argued that the self emerged from a splitting of the "me" (the object) from the "I" (the subject). This ability to perceive oneself from the point of view of others emerged in stages. First, we learn to take the role of one other person in one social situation through play. Think peek-a-boo: at first, a baby thinks that if she covers her eyes, you can't see her. She is only able to mimic. But soon she learns through one-on-one games to take the role of another player vis-à-vis herself. Playing house, playing go fish, playing any simple game forces the child to think about how—in that specific, structured situation—she is perceived by the other player. Then she moves up to an ability to take the role of multiple others but still within a highly constrained social situation. Team sports are a good example. If you've ever seen a pack of four year olds play soccer, it's abundantly clear that they have not mastered the notion that there are multiple players all reacting differently given their particular roles (i.e., positions). Eventually the kids get it and can play a given position and anticipate multiple players' reactions given their knowledge of roles and scripts for particular positions in specific situations.

Complete, true selfdom—the split between the "I" and the "me"—is only reached when we are able to see ourselves as the "generalized other" perceives us. The generalized other, according to Mead, is the abstracted reactions of many others in many situations. Situations, even, that we may never have encountered. (If you've seen the film *Borat*, you can see how well the generalized other functions: Even when a pair of naked pseudo-journalists enter the

elevator with folks, most know to still stare at the numbers.) So it appears to be all a social process—from imitation to play to games to our encounters with Borat. However, in order to see ourselves as the generalized other sees us, we need to spend time alone, disconnected, to incubate the reactions we have gotten, review the videotape, so to speak, and to integrate across all the social interactions in the same way we need sleep to filter and process the day's learning.

We also need a backstage, to borrow the term Erving Goffman used in his 1963 classic, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. The backstage is exactly what it sounds like: the safe, private space where we explicitly don't have to worry about the generalized other watching us, where we can let our hair down, practice our new social routines, and where we can strike back against the indignations of life in the public square—where, in other words, I could curse the damn French baker for humiliating me. The backstage, is where our "true" self resides, as distinct from the front stage self that we present at the office, in a restaurant, at the doctor's office, or just walking down the street.

And herein lies the connection between solitude and intimacy: Until we have (and can protect) that private self, we cannot be intimate with anyone. For intimacy, to extend Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor, is like giving backstage passes to a select few. It rests on the private self remaining distinct from the public self so that you have something to offer in exchange for peeks behind the curtains of your BFFs. But besides leaving us precious little time to develop that authentic self—to develop a relationship between the "I" and the "me"—the cell phone in the garden erodes that private space through the way it transforms our very social interaction itself.

Recently I found among my Facebook feed the announcement that a professional colleague I had never met in person (but whose work I admire and who friended me) was getting divorced. It was all going to be OK, he told me and 368 other "friends," since a shared-custody arrangement had been arrived at and his ex and he were going to remain friends. My generalized other kicked into action, and I felt squeamish for having read this painful, personal information that I really shouldn't know. But more and more of our interactions take place in broadcast mode—i.e., front stage. By definition, if you are tweeting something to all your followers or your Facebook buddies, then you are on front stage. Or are you? The whole metaphor breaks down online as privacy is turned inside out, and perhaps the best policy is to hide in plain sight. And yes, as our parents join Facebook, perhaps we will migrate to another site or create other aliases on Twitter for our real BFFs. But without

that clear curtain to retreat to, that physical door to close to make sure none else is listening, it gets pretty hard to have a private cohesive self and, by extension, intimacy.

If the locomotive as "machine in the garden" was the nineteenth-century metaphor for the tension between the pastoral and the industrial, then the iPhone becomes the relevant image for the lone cowboy and his ambivalent relationship to the new, social economy of Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and a thousand apps yet to be born in the minds of Silicon Valley venture capitalists. For the train was not just a link to the factory; it was a linchpin to the steel and coal economy, linking once-distant markets as its smoke poured out across the virginal skyscape of North America. Likewise, the iPhone is not just a link to the social economy; it is its principle instrument of trade.

But what makes the smartphone all the more pernicious is its fetishsizing of the social. While fetishizing has taken on myriad connotations as of late (mostly sexual), the original meaning as offered by Karl Marx (no relation to Leo) is worth recalling. Fetishizing occurs when an object is imbued with such power as to exert a social force over the individual. Marx claimed that this happened when social relations were monetized and the products we created—through the division of labor—were more complicated than one lone craftsman could comprehend. In this way—through factory work on the assembly line—the person was no longer dominant over the tool or product he created. Rather, the product is larger than any lone individual can conceive and produce himself and instead comes to dominate him.

The same process can be said to be happening with respect to social life. Slowly, slowly, face-to-face interaction, unmediated by technology, is being eclipsed by mediated communication. From smoke signals to papyrus to moveable type to the telegraph to instant messaging, the means of production of communication have become more elaborate and obscured from the user to the point that the medium—the iPhone—has truly become the message, to appropriate Marshall McLuhan's famous quote. Or if not having "become" the message, it has at least come to dominate the message.