



'What's happening?'

Banality & Intimacy in Mobile & Social Media¹

» KATE CRAWFORD

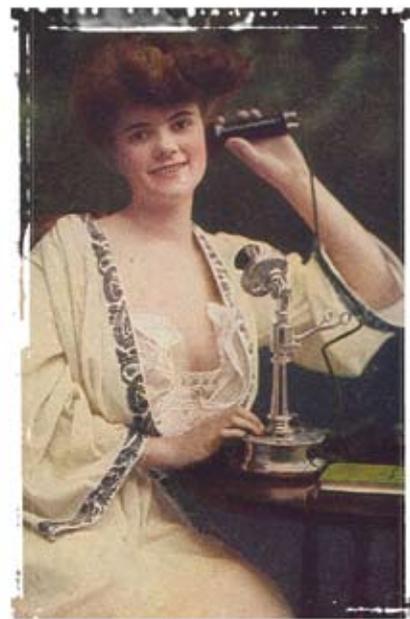
And what, exactly, is it that keeps people, especially young adults, jabbering away into the mobiles held to their ears, or the microphones dangling from their necks? What portentous information, what profound philosophical insight, is it that can't wait until they are home again, or in the actual physical presence of their interlocutor?²

So writes Imre Salusinszky in *The Australian* newspaper. His is one of many voices in the popular media that claim mobile phones are a technology for banality in human communication. We have all doubtless been annoyed by loud, one-sided mobile conversations, best portrayed by *The Chaser* in the form of Clive the Slightly Too Loud Commuter. Young people, however, are most regularly singled out as broadcasting the banal into public space.

This irritation over irrelevant chit-chat from the young mirrors earlier studies into attitudes about women's use of fixed-line telephones. As Lana Rakow observed in her American study *Gender on the Line*, women have commonly been criticised by men for the triviality, length and expense of their calls.³ In Australia, twenty years ago, Ann Moyal conducted a similar study to investigate how women used the landline telephone to form and maintain social bonds, and found that regular

discussions about ordinary day-to-day events were critical.⁴ Moyal drew on Suzanne Keller's work that distinguished between two genres of phone conversation: the instrumental and the intrinsic.⁵ Instrumental calls, focused on making business arrangements, making appointments or seeking information, were dramatically outnumbered in frequency and length by intrinsic calls — personal, 'unpressured' exchanges, also known as idle chat.

Women's use of the phone established what Moyal describes as a 'network of callers



which constitute an "electronic community" of friendships, mutual support and kin-

(above)
Bonus Bureau,
Computing Division,
24 November 1924.

SOURCE: SHORPY.

(right)
Woman using
telephone, c. 1910,
from US postcard.

SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA.

keeping’, a ‘“psychological neighbourhood” that substituted for face-to-face contact’.⁶ This intimacy over distance was maintained precisely by sharing the banalities of everyday life, by talking about what might seem to others to be insignificant details.

There is thus a long tradition of depicting both women and young people as being problematically trivial in their phone use, with their discussions of the everyday seen as inferior or degraded forms of communication. Such a view values those forms of phone use that are instrumental rather than intimate — characteristics coded as ‘adult’ and ‘male’. The criticisms of women for their insignificant chats on fixed-line phones discount the emotional ties developed by these conversations, the care-giving work that both Moyal and Rakow found to be so significant. Likewise, the discourses about young people’s trivial conversations on mobiles overlook the importance of the social bonds developed and maintained in these modes. As Meaghan Morris wrote, banality is ‘always a mask for

exchanges about everyday occurrences represent a connected intimacy between close friends and family. As Ilpo Koskinen noted in his study of mobiles:

In our experiments, it has been a technology that ‘explodes banality’. With it, people transform small things in everyday life into mutual entertainment.⁹

The banal proliferates through mobile media; but it is not without function. Mobile users may be remote, but they are describing elements of their working day, their train ride, or their decisions about what to cook for dinner. They may photograph their cat, a road sign or a particularly good cup of coffee, and upload this to Facebook or Twitter. Once, such moments could only be shared with intimates — people who share working space or home space.

As a ‘machinery that produces banality’,¹⁰ mobile media invite remote friends and family to partake in these experiences in spite of physical distance. Ito and Okabe observe that

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questions of value, of value judgement and “discrimination” — especially in the sense of how we distinguish and evaluate problems [...] and defend our choice of what matters’.⁷

Of course, much of human conversation is couched in small talk and embedded in the mundane. There are the exchanges that contain no substantive content whatsoever, but serve to put people at ease. First described by Bronislaw Malinowski when observing the Trobriand Islanders, ‘phatic communication’ — an exchange that contains almost no substantive content — exists to strengthen social bonds, such that the ‘ties of union are created by the mere exchange of words’.⁸ In such communication, the content of the conversation is not important, as it is an exchange which prioritises a recognition of the other’s presence: ‘So what’s happening?’

Mobile conversations commonly contain phatic and non-phatic modes. Even when offering little by way of substantive content,

mobile phones function as a form of ‘glue for cementing a space of shared intimacy’, between lovers, close friends and acquaintances.¹¹ As fixed-line telephones offer intimacy over distance, so mobiles offer intimacy that travels with you, or ‘full-time intimate community’.¹²

But how does this intimacy change in character when it is shared over a social network, in a public or semi-public space? The social network, Twitter, launched in 2006, is one such space; it garners particular criticism (and much popularity) for trading in the worst kind of human banality.

TWITTER AND THE USES OF BANALITY

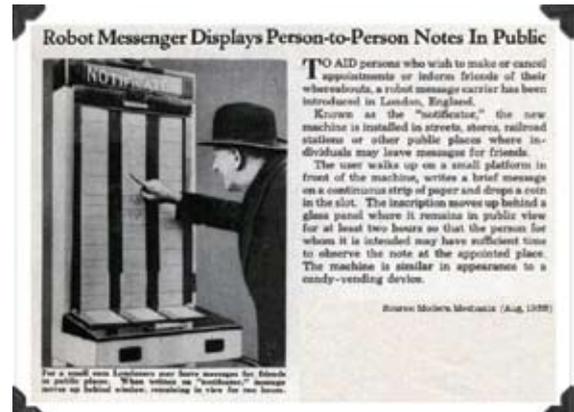
Twitter asks its users to answer a question in one hundred and forty characters or less: ‘What’s happening?’ This commonly phatic question can nonetheless be answered in both instrumental and intimate ways: some people write about their lunch, others may link to a breaking news

(right)
The Notificator
– an early precursor
to Twitter.

SOURCE: MODERN
MECHANIX (AUG, 1935).

story, or share a photograph of a protest. What's happening may be nothing much or, as we saw with the explosion of Twitter messages about the Iranian elections of 2008, it may be something many people see as highly significant. One way to observe Twitter is via Twitversation, which tracks messages in real-time, mapped against a Google world map: <http://www.twitversation.com>. *The New York Times* describes it as 'an absorbing spectacle: a global vision of the human race's quotidian thoughts and activities.'¹³

The number of Twitter users is growing. While the company does not release figures, research firm comScore estimated there were nineteen million visitors to Twitter's web site in March 2009. This figure nonetheless fails to capture the many people who access Twitter via their mobile phone. While it may be popular, Twitter is attracting negative descriptions



Twitter, three main criticisms of the service persist: 'Why would anyone want to do this?', 'It's pointless', 'It's trivial.'¹⁸

But this very mundanity is central to Twitter's success. As a service, it offers us access to the everyday thoughts of people we are interested in. Rather than the more

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that include 'pointless' and 'time-consuming', as well as 'problematic' and 'addictive'. Lev Grossman in *Time Magazine* describes Twitter as the 'cocaine of blogging or e-mail but refined into crack'.¹⁴ Productivity author Tim Ferriss calls Twitter 'pointless email on steroids'.¹⁵ According to the science fiction author and Twitter user, Bruce Sterling, 'using Twitter for literate communication is about as likely as firing up a CB radio and hearing some guy recite *The Iliad*'.¹⁶

Micro-blogging encourages the disclosure of simple, easily described moments. Social networking researchers Ashkay Java *et al.* analysed Twitter traffic and found that the greatest number of posts were about 'daily routine or what people are currently doing', followed by conversations — people responding to each other's updates.¹⁷ Twitter's emphasis on temporality (accounting for actions in the present tense) seems to exaggerate the possibility for banality. Twittering from a work computer can encourage messages about the office, or discoveries on the web, while messages from a phone can encourage 'out in the field' reports from events, dinners, gigs or trains. According to Evan Williams, co-founder of

substantial writing that may be developed in blogs, 'tweets' record the moments that are not usually saved for posterity, brief moments that normally disappear beneath the surface of life. In Maurice Blanchot's words, 'the everyday escapes, it belongs to insignificance.'¹⁹

So why is it that groups of friends, associates and strangers delight in reading these insignificant details from the lives of others? Bachelard once argued that there was a pure joy in recognising the shared experience of trivial, everyday things, as 'insignificance becomes the sign of extreme sensitivity to the intimate means that establish an understanding between writer and reader'.²⁰ There is a tightly wound loop between the roles of reading and writing on Twitter; users switch from being one to the other in the space of a moment.

Another co-founder of Twitter, Jack Dorsey, has described how people respond when they first hear that tweets are mainly about simple moments such as cleaning the bathroom or boiling the kettle:

The first reaction is to hate it because it's seen as the most useless thing in the world and no one would ever want to know about

boiling water. But these small details in life are what connect us most. Everyone has these specific moments and you normally don't bring them up in conversation because it seems so trivial but it's not, it's really important.²¹

Dorsey's belief in the importance of small details begs the question of why such moments in life are of consequence. How does the sharing of daily actions and thoughts operate to connect people and create intimacy? Elspeth Probyn raises this question in her essay 'Thinking Habits and the Ordering of Life'.²² For Probyn, domestic duties trouble the boundary lines between what Charles Pierce described as 'the outer world' of social reality and the 'inner world' of subjectivity. Paying heed to ordinary tasks and mundane details reveals the fabricated nature of this dividing line.

In a similar way, Twitter can be understood as a mechanism that commingles these two worlds, where 'the inner and the outer

the household, it could never break loose and initiate communication.'²⁴

Twitter is a networked space where we can see the breaking loose of these everyday acts, as they become the basis for communication. Insignificant details, the ordinary, the domestic are the ties that bind groups of users together. Furthermore Twitter offers different analytic perspectives on how people enact intimacy and connection. It reverses the idea of isolated users receiving thin channels of human contact, where trivial details or chatter are deemed to be empty forms of communication. Instead, small details and daily events cumulate over time to give a sense of the rhythms and flows of another's life. The background awareness of others offered by Twitter has been described as 'social proprioception': a subtle, shifting knowledge of where people are, what pressures or pleasures they are experiencing.²⁵ Leisa Reichelt calls it 'ambient intimacy': an 'ongoing noise' of

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continually move through each other'.²³ Domestic chores and cleaning, in many forms, are popular topics on Twitter: in domestic space, office space, but also the many kinds of electronic self-maintenance and clean up. It may be organising an email inbox, deleting texts on a phone, or updating Facebook or Flickr. People are regularly Twittering on these topics, as the answer to 'what are you doing now?' is often something as banal as cleaning and sorting, in all its forms.

Feminist theorists have struggled with the importance of the trivial tasks of the domestic everyday for many decades. Sylvia Bovenschen wrote in 1976 about the limitations of the ordinary tasks of household and self-maintenance:

[These activities] remained bound to everyday life, feeble attempts to make this sphere more aesthetically pleasing [...] But [housework] could never leave the realm in which it came into being, it remained tied to

the everyday experiences of people one cares about.²⁶ Beyond the restricted understanding of the intimate that prioritises exchanges of gravity and magnitude, Twitter represents something more molecular and dispersed.

However, Twitter's capacity to connect people via short reports of their activities can also generate forms of claustrophobia and distaste. Twitter updates can literally interrupt one's working day — particularly as some Twitter clients 'pop up' recent tweets from friends directly on screen. These messages can provide a moment of respite or amusement, or they can be an unwelcome disruption. For people who work from home, the 'disjointed conversations' of Twitter can be a source of distraction, a dispersed social space that can be both pleasant and unpleasant: 'like a watercooler or lunch room'.²⁷

But the composition of that social space can present problems. Users ultimately must decide how to construct their own environment in Twitter (a public or private profile; a set

of friends with or without professional colleagues), yet there are few established forms of etiquette when it comes to these negotiations. If these environments operate as a form of networked intimacy that includes close friends, family, distant acquaintances, colleagues and strangers, the decisions about how much and which elements of the ‘inner world’ to share are complex.

(right)
Typist at typewriter,
from French
postcard, c. 1910.

SOURCE: WIKIMEDIA.

In addition, the conversational field presented by a Twitter network can be fractured in two critical ways: being disjointed in time and reaching different publics. First, messages may not be seen and responded to until after a posting has lost its currency. Second, messages are broadcast to a user’s entire contact-base, but when friends’ social networks do not exactly coincide with one another, each interlocutor is effectively speaking to a different audience. Conversations can thus seem out of joint: a message is answered too late, or a ‘crossed line’ effect emerges when people have lost the thread of a discussion.

While the general operation of Twitter is the gradual accretion of everyday moments and passing thoughts, there is considerable variation in how people adapt this process. Some use it to describe what they are doing, others use it to share information or converse, others confabulate and entertain. Regardless of the importance or banality of these contributions, they are read by a community of users who come

see that a conversation has a life of its own and makes demands on its own behalf. It is a little social system with its own boundary-maintaining tendencies; it is a little patch of commitment and loyalty with its own heroes and its own villains.²⁸



Goffman’s work has been taken up by mobile scholars who are seeking to understand how ritualised communication is used to develop social bonds.²⁹ While the possible channels for ‘talk’ have expanded since Goffman published *Interaction Ritual* in 1967, conversations continue to build affective ties and define boundaries regardless of the medium in which they occur. As Hjorth has noted, the practice of intimacy has always been mediated;³⁰ so we can find many commonalities between

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to recognise and relate to that presence, tracking their moods, habits and whims. In this way, Twitter is best understood as a disclosing space, with all that entails: truth, falsity, humour, triviality, drudgery, gossip and camaraderie.

DISCLOSING SPACES

Writing about the experience of a face-to-face discussion, Erving Goffman argues:

[T]alk is unique, however, for talk creates for the participant a world and a reality that has other participants in it [...] We must also

in-person, fixed-line telephone, mobile and socially networked conversations. But there are also important differences.

Although the importance of sharing the everyday remains, the available technologies do so evolve and create new spaces, subtly changing the capacities for emotional exchange. As the fixed-line telephone offered the intimacy of listening over distance, so the mobile phone allows those conversations to happen in new territories: textual, visual and aural, moving along with the user. Mobile social networks offer us yet more angles of perception on human rapport and

its plasticity. In semi-public networks such as Twitter, new collective intimacies develop — social groups that bond through the minutiae of their lives, gradually developing a more granular awareness of each other.

Each medium also presents a set of limitations. Twitter's restriction to one hundred and forty characters per message provides a

Goffman emphasised the importance of 'talk' to social bonding, but my interest now lies with understanding and researching the developing modes of 'listening' that underscore what is particular to intimacy in networked mobile media. Twitter is one instance of a space where 'listening in' to the disclosures of others occurs continuously, as

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clear example of a designated boundary that preconditions the kinds of communication that is possible. Its emphasis on reporting the quotidian also constitutes a restraint on other forms of discourse. As we have seen, Twitter users find many ways to adapt the form to their own ends, but there is a limit point: such a space is not conducive to lengthy political debate or detailed analysis. As Bovenschen reminds us, the everyday also creates a bind. While it is valuable and important in human connection, can it ever transcend its realm to instigate other forms of debate, reaction or change? Cultural and feminist theorists have done considerable work to reframe the value and function of 'idle chat' and the everyday, and while they point to the structural limitations, they also suggest its crucial role in building human intimacy.

Sustaining multiple, near simultaneous conversations over communications technologies is commonplace — a discussion over a fixed line at work while responding to email, replying to instant messages while chatting across a kitchen table, sending a tweet while listening to a band at a pub. These are all different kinds of disclosing spaces, some being one-on-one, others being within a closed group of friends, or open to whoever is listening. Disclosing requires a listener in order constitute a 'disclosure', and as the technological modes of speaking have changed, so have the modes of listening. As mobile media forms offer us new spaces of disclosure, so we develop capacities for hearing in different ways: face-to-face, over the phone, or just 'in the background' as we listen to channels of personal daydreams and insignificant chatter.

people tune in to updates from other users over the course of the day. In the history of research into technologies such as the Internet, this kind of activity is never considered participation — merely 'lurking'. Yet it is in this receptive mode, scanning updates in a way that is more akin to radio listening than reading, that the majority of time online is spent. This emerging, diffuse familiarity with the often banal details of people's lives is an important part of the connection and intimacy of mobile and social media. ¶



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1. This article is an extract from Kate Crawford, 'These Foolish Things: On Intimacy and Insignificance in Mobile Media', in *Mobile Technologies: From Telecommunications to Media*, ed. by Gerard Goggin and Larissa Hjorth (New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 252-265.
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3. See Lana Rakow, *Gender on the Line: Women, the Telephone, and Community Life* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1992).
4. Ann Moyal, 'The Feminine Culture of the Telephone: People, Patterns and Policy', *Prometheus*, 7, 1, (1989), pp. 5-31.
5. See Suzanne Keller, 'The Telephone in New (and Old) Communities', in *The Social Impact of the Telephone*, ed. by Ithiel de Sola Pool (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977), pp. 281-98.

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7. Meaghan Morris, 'Banality in Cultural Studies', in *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, ed. by Patricia Mellencamp (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 40.
8. Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelago of Melanesian New Guinea* (London: Routledge, 1922), p. 315.
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17. Ashkay Java, Xiaodan Song, Tim Finin and Belle Tseng, 'Why We Twitter: Understanding the Microblogging Effect in User Intentions and Communities', proceedings of WebKDD/SNAKDD 2007: *Workshop on Web Mining and Social Network Analysis*, 12 August 2007, pp. 56-66.
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19. Blanchot quoted in Rita Felski, *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), p. 78.
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21. Jack Dorsey quoted in AFP, 'Net's a Twitter with the Sound of Mundane', *The Australian*, 12 June 2007, p. 27.
22. Elspeth Probyn, 'Thinking Habits and the Ordering of Life', in *Ordinary Lifestyles: Popular Media, Consumption and Taste*, ed. by David Bell and Joanne Hollows (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 2005), pp. 243-254.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 254.
24. Bovenschen quoted in *ibid.*, p. 252.
25. Thompson, 'How Twitter Creates a Social Sixth Sense'.
26. See Leisa Reichelt, 'Ambient Intimacy', *Disambiguity Blog*, posted on 1 March 2007, <<http://www.disambiguity.com/ambient-intimacy>> [accessed 12 November 2009].
27. Glenda Hyatt, comment on 'I love Twitter, But I Have to Quit It', *Jim Kukral Blog*, comment posted 28 November 2007, <<http://www.jimkukral.com/i-love-twitter-but-i-have-to-quit-it/>> [accessed 4 December 2009]. Hyatt has cerebral palsy, but uses Twitter to stay in touch with others while she works from home as a writer and blogger.
28. Erving Goffman, *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2005), pp. 113-114.
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