

Rhythms and ties:

Towards a pragmatics of technologically-mediated sociability

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Abstract

Mediated interpersonal communications (from paper letters to various forms of electronic communication) provides new topics for social networks research. Personal networks not only shape, but are shaped by technological means for communication. In this paper we analyze mediated sociability as resulting from the dynamical interplay between the structure of social networks, the various types of exchanges supported by social bonds (made up of a succession of embodied gestures and language acts) and the range of available technological resources to sustain such exchanges. Each of these components of mediated sociability acts both as a constraint on and a resource for the practices involved in the management of sociability. Based on several empirical studies, we discuss in more detail the rhythms or time patterns of mediated exchange, contrasting an intermittent and a continuous regime for mediated sociability. In the former regime, ICTs are used to bridge over distance. The corresponding relational economy is structured by an inverse relationship between geographical distance and frequency of mediated exchanges, and a direct one between geographical distance and the size of mediated exchanges. In the latter regime, privileged correspondents continuously meet and exchange phone calls, emails and SMS. In this seamless web of mediated communication that make up the very fabric of connected presence, communication as a gestures or a token of attention may be more meaningful than what is said or written.

1. Introduction

Almost a century has passed since Georg Simmel (1908) founded his sociology on a dialectic between social structure and interpersonal interaction. In Simmel's perspective, society exists wherever people act reciprocally towards each other. Social forms are woven by such reciprocal action, but take on independent life and, in turn, constrain action. This perspective allowed Simmel to analyze various forms of social life. At the time he formulated his structuralist interactionism (Forsé 2002), Simmel had in mind primarily situations of face-to-face interaction. Nonetheless, there is no reason why we cannot apply this same approach to analyze the role that different kinds of media (e.g., telephone rather than face-to-face conversation) have in interaction. Simmel's sociology therefore can serve as a framework for analyzing how forms of association are changing in a context where digital technologies have become widespread. The formats in which interpersonal interactions take place were already complex, either in the home (Albert, 1993), or in the office (Fraenkel, 1995), before the advent of information technology, as research on different forms of writing and inscriptions formats has shown. However, the massive development of IT has led to a significant increase in the range of interactional devices of which people may avail themselves. So alongside the standard household telephone we have public phones and portable phones—both of which today may permit the sending of text as well as voice messages—and all the communication services which can be used through a computer connected to a network (i.e., e-mail, chat sites, discussion forums, instant message services, etc.). It is therefore important to examine this dimension where a growing number of technologies of for social interaction come into play, because the sense of each of these different technologies depends not only on their suitability for a particular kind of user

and a particular type of exchange, but also on the position of each alternative vis-à-vis others in a technological landscape that has become increasingly crowded and varied. The concepts of “interaction” and “inter-personal exchange” are too general here, for they both lump together and obscure two distinct forms of complexity. The first concerns the contents and formats of an exchange: in other words, the contents of the conversations and the way conversations are organized in discursive genres, which make up, together with intervening face-to-face meetings, the warp and woof of social ties. The second concerns the diverse technical means which affect the sense of these discursive activities and the way they are produced, diffused, and appropriated within the framework of reciprocal relations¹.

We will define interpersonal sociability in very general terms as the flow of exchanges that people maintain with those to whom they are connected. We therefore see sociability as having *three* distinct poles: *i*) the social network (a set of social ties possessing one or more relational measures²); *ii*) exchanges themselves in the strict sense, made up of a succession of embodied gestures and language acts. These may take a number of forms even within one medium—as has been shown by research on writing³, the telephone⁴, or on the forms of interactional reciprocity⁵; *iii*) the various technical means which are available at a given moment of historical time and which enable an exchange to happen. These poles both pose constraints on and provide resources for

interactions; thus all three poles shape the form that relational practices take.

In our tri-polar description, sociability is thus a bubbling of conversations, messages, and contextualized exchanges: a process inscribed in a multidimensional space consisting of networks of ties, forms of exchange, and interactional mediations. Through the webf interactions we can identify forms of coherence, or patterns where the nature of social relations are shaped alongside the relevance of discursive forms and the implications of technological media. None of these is completely determined beforehand. Certain patterns allow particular kinds of relations to crystallize out of the interactional froth. They can then be specified and compared to the canonical models of close ties. There are distinct ways of weaving the web of interactions between, say, an intimate friend compared to a simple acquaintance. Only certain ways of communicating are appropriate to each relationship type. There are ways of managing a tie that parallel how the tie itself is developing, and these play on the various discursive and technical resources which are available to shape the tie in the desired direction in an acceptable time frame. Nor should we assume that there is just one way of achieving this. Sociability is malleable: a specific kind of tie can be enacted in various interactional patterns. There is much discretion with regard to the forms and formats of reciprocal exchanges that progressively define a tie in the overall web of sociability.

In this framework, sociability is neither determined nor random. We have tried to construct an analytic framework of ties and of sociability that are rooted in

time, in order to bring out a relational economy of sociability. While this relational economy is too malleable to be guided by anything but diffuse representations⁶, it is sufficiently rigid to produce observable patterns. These patterns do not lead to principles that themselves determine relational practices, but rather to ways of organizing the work of sociability that allows us to understand its sense and interpret the way it develops. It is these patterns that we will try to identify via analysis of communication at various points in the life course, which transform actors' contexts and force them to redistribute their relational practices. We will concentrate mainly on the strong ties of family and friendship.

We draw here on a series of empirical studies. The first set of studies contain databases of telephone traffic and interviews focusing on the use of the telephone. These provide us with both quantitative and qualitative material on ego-centred personal networks of telephone/electronic sociability⁷, plus qualitative information on interpersonal exchanges that take place through other media. The studies in question cover the way that practices of social life change with biographical events such as a move (Mercier, de Gournay, and Smoreda 2002) or the birth of a first child (Mançeron, Lelong, and Smoreda 2002). Despite being commonplace, these biographical events are major tests in the construction of self. They constitute particularly interesting areas in which to examine our hypotheses regarding the connections between the public representations, which are more or less shared, that organize coherence and the concrete involvement of actors in relational practices. How do people cope with the time constrictions introduced by the arrival of a first child, and

with the new family configuration that the event brings: in what way do they redistribute their relational activity to satisfy these new conditions? How do we adjust when a geographical move takes us away from friends and relatives (and perhaps puts us closer to others)? Events such as the birth of a child or a move lead to redeployment of relational resources and a reevaluation of one's personal network, and thus to a change in the way that people keep their network together and a change in the type of both exchanges and the technical means used to make these changes. This provides an empirical opportunity to observe sociability at work in its triple inscription in social networks, forms of exchange, and uses of communication technologies.

We also draw on a second group of studies which investigate interpersonal exchange via screens—forms of “always connected” sociability. These studies provide quantitative⁸ and qualitative data on uses of the Internet: for example, the way people use spaces of interpersonal communication (Beaudouin and Velkowska 1999), and consumption and gifts (Licoppe, Assadi and Pharabod 2003). We will also use the results of research carried out on the exchange of messages via mobile phones (Rivière 2002; Rivière and Licoppe 2004).

We begin by examining a number of rather specific exchanges, such as the transmission of news regarding the birth of a child or the purchase of Christmas gifts, to show how actors distribute their various relations and interactional modes. This will show that it is necessary to take into account the changing technological landscape when we analyse sociability. The examples also bring out a theme which will be central in our analysis—the temporal

rhythm of mediated exchanges, and the way such rhythms are stretched by various expectations and conventions.

2. The rhythms of mediated interaction and the production and reproduction of social networks

The course of interaction is guided by conventions, but is also constructed in the course of the interaction itself. The temporal rhythm of exchanges and the degree of attention expected from one's interlocutor differ from one medium to another. Actions and reciprocal actions can take place on the model of a dialogue, where exchanges evoke responses almost immediately, or alternatively may leave much longer intervening pauses—intervals which may or may not be accepted as standard, and may or may not be acceptable. In certain cases the action initiating the cycle has a conventional format. For example, biographical events like marriage, moving house, or the birth of a child produce the almost ritual format of the "announcement". Since these exchanges have a generic character they can take place on different media without changing form, and often without involving extra effort. So the choice of one medium rather than another has a social sense: the decision to use a particular way of announcing the event is a way of reaffirming and reshaping closeness and distance in the personal network. In general, the closer the relation, the more important it will be to make the announcement rapidly and to obtain a reply. In the same way, the use of a particular medium for communicating the news is taken as a statement of distance or closeness, depending on what delay a particular technical medium allows in replying.

This particular type of interaction shows how the choice of one medium rather than another produces and reproduces the social structure. It shows that when analysing sociability, we do indeed need to pay attention to the technical means used to communicate.

We can thus observe that the announcement of the birth of a first child takes place in a series of concentric circles, starting with members of the immediate family and closest friends, followed by “less close” friends and more distant family, with acquaintances, cousins, colleagues, etc., coming last. According to whether the news comes directly from the parents or via an intermediary; whether it comes directly after the birth or with a certain delay, and whether it comes via face-to-face contact, telephone, e-mail, or letter, a hierarchy of relations emerges: *“We told our parents and grand-parents first; it was Pierre who told them. And it was they who passed on the news to the uncles and aunts and cousins ... So they heard at 2.30 a.m. (...) Then the following day we phoned our closest friends, and they passed the word on to friends who aren't quite as close. I mean, a bit less close or who we hadn't spoken to on the phone for a while...”* (woman, 28, couple with one child). The first people chosen to hear the news thus hear it without any intermediary as a sign of the quality of the relationship.

The calls made immediately after the birth and in the following days by the people who act as relays for the news are complemented by other means of communication—written announcements and e-mail messages—which make up a second level of prioritisation. Once again there is a correspondence between the means used and the content of the relationship. Friends who are

seen less frequently receive a written announcement of the event, whereas colleagues are more likely to receive an e-mail⁹. These written media are less committing in terms of reciprocity compared to conversation (face-to-face or on the phone). There is more delay before these messages are sent, and a further delay is expected before a reply comes. The length of this latter delay can be read as a sign of the degree of involvement of those receiving the message, a measure of how close they feel to the new parents. Those friends who do not reply, or reply only after a long delay, might be abandoned, whereas certain others who reply more quickly than expected might occasionally be readmitted to the circle of intimates.

The differential use of particular means of communication thus lays down a space of relational practices where ties of similar closeness are treated in a similar way, and where this degree of closeness is publicly expressed and negotiated. Relational proximity is shown to be greater if the news comes via telephone immediately (rather than with a delay) and directly (without the mediation of another person), and depending on whether it comes in the form of a written announcement (which may or may not be followed by a telephone contact), and according to whether it comes via mail specially addressed to one individual or to a whole list of people¹⁰.

[figure 1 here]

The question of time is ever-present. The event of a birth constitutes a testing or sounding of the network of social relations, in the sense that it is an

occasion in which the relational distance between the couple and their various ties is redefined. The delay between the event and the announcement of the event can be seen as a statement of the tempo of the relationship, and thus of relational proximity. The status of relations within the personal network is thus renegotiated via a temporal metric, a timing that depends both on when the news is given, and on when the reply is received. The role of different interactional media in sociability is also reaffirmed and redefined in the course of this test, which employs them to perform the same language act, but to different persons. Telephone contact comes out as having the highest status, being most appropriate for giving the news to the closest circle of family and friends, those whom one prefers to see or hear from in the immediate context of the event.

The work of sociability thus turns into a joint redefinition of relational proximities in the network, and a redefinition of the sense of each of the interactional resources available for the maintenance of the relationship. This redefinition makes use of an ordinary event and a standardized interactional format: the announcement. Such a biographical event is thus the occasion for a test which concerns the most appropriate modalities of adjusting the interactional dynamics¹¹.

Similar patterns can be seen in the various festivities of the year and in the gift giving that these involve, since timing is also crucial here. A mother interviewed in one of our studies, who is a frequent Internet user, says she would not consider ordering her son's Christmas present on the Web—fearing

that the delay in delivery might make the present arrive late, because her role as mother means that the present must be there on the day. Things are different, in contrast, with regard to the neighbour's children: "*On the other hand, for the neighbours' kids I normally order them through Alapage des BD .. if they don't arrive, well they'll have to wait till the 26th. I'll tell them, 'Look...' They'll have their presents from their parents. It's not the same thing for your own child. If I saw my Paul putting out his stocking and all the others had their presents, but not him, you can imagine his face...*" (woman, 39, mother of three children). Events and ritual festivities thus work as tests of a relationship. They are an occasion for reaffirming the strength of a relationship or, on the contrary, for endorsing its inevitable decline. The use that one makes of the different temporal arrangements that are implicit in various technical means of communication expresses this hierarchy.

But a tie is woven out of many contexts, many occasions, and many technical means of communication. It is constructed through a constant point and counterpoint of interaction, a chronicle of encounters—each with a particular form of communication—where the thread of timing stitches presence and absence according to the characteristic modes which make up a relationship. To conceptualise the three-cornered dynamic between the tie, the forms of the exchange, and the technical means used, requires an analytic framework that takes account of how a tie is "tied," how interactions via various media are both ordered in time, and how they are interspersed with periods of silence or

inattentiveness. How can we conceptualize this time of daily life, which beats out the rhythm of a tie and elaborates the motif which makes the tie unique?

3. The music of interpersonal ties

3.1 Rhythms of exchange and dynamics of sociability

Numerous writers have emphasized the links between time and activity, showing, for example, how industrial society brought with it more rigid forms of time observance (Thompson 1967). However, the subtle adjustment of the timing of both presence and absence in everyday social relations has attracted little attention. Roland Barthes' (2002) analysis of the conditions of a happy "living together" constitute an exception, since this discusses how an individual may alternate between periods of isolation, in which he or she follows their own rhythm¹², and periods of exchange and conviviality. Although Barthes' reasoning emerged out of analysis of ancient forms of the ascetic life, and of various texts of the literary canon, this construction of a "living together" is applicable to any community where the personal rhythm of each person has its place. It connotes any enterprise which attempts to flexibly reconcile collective life and individual life; the independence of the subject, and the social life of the group.

One of the principal insights that this approach brings is that it permits us to conceptualise several temporal orientations of collective action. As is well

known, the question of time is closely linked to that of power—to impose one's own time rhythm on someone is to exercise power over them. On the other hand, *rhythm* should be distinguished from what we will call *cadence*, which is a temporal ordering that exists outside interaction, being imposed by rules and institutions. Freedom is in the rhythm: only the subject can slow down the pressure of the cadence. Any flexible mode of association that allows individuals to follow their own rhythms is opposed to regulated communities and their imposed cadences, to the extent that these communities allow individuals the possibility of following their own rhythms. The principle, which underlies all such forms of association where one's own rhythm can be expressed, is therefore that it is opposed to institutions, hierarchies, rules, and to their cadences that interfere with the rhythm of living-together. To the metaphor of society as an ant-hill, Barthes opposes the alternative model of society as a school of fish: a smooth symbiosis of individuals which are nonetheless separate, equidistant, with synchronized movements.

If this living-together is the flexible grouping of a limited number of subjects who try to co-exist in the vicinity of each other while preserving their own rhythms, why should they group together at all? In such flexible, often elective, associations, there is not a strict causality (which would make the collectivity subject to a law, to rules, and to determinism). Rather, these associations offer a diffuse set of aims, which are often expressed via evocative and emotionally charged words. The grouping of living-together defines itself in this way, in the name of ideals—which must be sufficiently vague to remain relevant in spite of changing circumstances yet sufficiently

committing to hold the collective's loyalty, like a pure homeostatic machine which maintains itself.

As the metaphor of the school of fish suggests, living-together is an adjusted form of collective life that rests on an ethic of distance. Its dynamic equilibrium and its maintenance presuppose that the investment of individuals takes a suitable form, particularly with regard to efforts made to articulate the time of absence and meeting; the time of being present together and coexisting. If the whole holds together too loosely, there is a strong risk that individuals will become too distant from each other and fall into isolation and exile. If the tensions of living-together weigh too heavily on individuals who are subject to other exigencies, there will be friction between individuals who have become too close—thus the risk of regulation and alienation emerges. Finding the right distance, appropriate for the diffuse aims of the group and yet that allows the group to endure over time, involves a double question. What form of presence lasts when the members of the group are physically separated and following their own rhythms? This absence is not a form of exile: it is a kind of solitude which “in no way means absence from society—on the contrary, it is action of society at a distance, positive determination of the individual via negative socializing,” as Simmel (1900, p.366) remarks. Secondly, what role do moments of exchange and conviviality play in the affirmation and maintenance of this living-together sociability, in the moments of separation which follow? To these two central questions, implicit in Barthes' original model which opposes separate coexistence and co-presence, we would like to add one more: what difference does it make to living-

together when we have today many possibilities to maintain contacts over a physical distance?

The dynamic approach of living-together allows us to conceptualize the logics of sociability by examining the way this is inscribed in geographical space, in time, and in social forms. These questions have emerged fairly frequently since the social sciences have turned their attention to the collective seen as a set of coordinations linked by concurrent temporalities. The anthropologist Mary Douglas (1991) has analysed the organisation of the home from this point of view. She thinks of the household as a “middle way,” a kind of living-together between two extremes: on the one hand, the tyrannical domestic community which forces all its members to conform to the daily rituals of its rigid cadence (justified in the name of a formally explicit domestic collective well-being that threatens to represent anyone who does not conform as selfishly pursuing their own interests). On the other hand is a model that makes the home similar to a hotel, where the collective is dissolved by the closure of each family member in their own rhythms, which never synchronize in a moment of meeting and shared conviviality.

Focusing in this way on the rhythm of interactions in forms of association between persons provides a fruitful framework for thinking about interpersonal ties and all their forms. Describing a succession of exchanges in terms of ties provides a narrative and retrospective unity to a succession of interactions and exchanges spaced out over time. The tie thus emerges out of the tangled mass of sociability, making up a resource that leaves its mark on the interaction and that allows actors to orient themselves within the

relationship. The question emerges of how a strong dyadic tie (for example, a lasting friendship) becomes crystallized. And what reflexive relation does such a strong tie have with the temporal ordering of the course of interaction? How does the sense of the other person's presence last when they are not physically present, allowing the sense of friendship to persist? In certain cases the dyadic interpersonal link is inseparable from a collective tie. This is the case when actors have for the other the role of "go-between" or bridgehead into a group. This situation is common when people move, perhaps even changing country or going into exile: in this situation the emigrant may make telephone calls to a relative or friend back home, who gives the emigrant news of "all the gang," who are, however, seen collectively only on rare visits back "home."¹³ Here, interaction splits into two modes: interaction while the people are present, and interaction at a distance; the conjunction of the two modes makes up a hybrid rhythm that is characteristic of the way that interpersonal ties are inserted into a wider social and geographical territory. In other patterns, each party belongs to a rule-governed community where presence is made tangible via the imposition of cadences on each person. This means that a rhythm of social life has to be found that is compatible with each of these cadences if the interpersonal tie is to last. This is the case of friendships of members of two different households, where the people see each other as couples or as entire families.

Finally, it should be said that the approach is a dynamic one, which treats social life as a process and social structure as an emerging configuration. In advocating harmony of the rhythms of absence and presence as a condition of

happiness that is common to the various forms of association and ways of constructing interpersonal ties, we attempt (without having recourse necessarily to external determinants or to the deliberate intentions of individual actors) to grapple with the question of how private sociability manages to reproduce itself or reshape itself during biographical events where actors' environment and context changes. We will try to illustrate the relevance of this model for the description of personal sociability by examining close, indeed very close, relationships.

3.2 Sociability with close and intimate ties: an example of the pragmatics of “living-together”

When describing their social networks, almost everyone brings into play a special category of tie—that of the intimate, those who are very close. These are often friends who have become “like my family.” But this category of the intimate may also include members of the family circle itself; for example brothers, sisters, or cousins (usually members of the same generation) with whom the interviewee has a particularly strong and lasting relationship. These elective friendships are marked by reciprocity, sharing ideas and experiences, and similarity between oneself and intimate friend. These particularly close relationships are sharply distinguished from the general mill of acquaintances, both because one trusts them with confidences, and because one has confidence in them and how they will act. Thus familiarity shows through via the fact that it is possible to say anything and everything to each other, and to confide secrets, thus conforming to the formula of intimate outpouring. “*With*

your friends, you talk about lots ...with a girl I'm friendly with, really friendly, I'll tell her a secret" (woman, 40, in a couple relationship with two children).

And they are people who will always "be there" when needed, those whom you can count on being there when you call for help and for whom you will be there too: "...*people you can count on. You know that you can call them at two in the morning, waking them up. Whatever it is you need... They'll still give you their shirt off their back if that's what you want...and they know that you'd do the same for them"* (woman, 60, couple with three grown up children).

Friendships of this kind are meant to last. The expectation is that contacts will be maintained, and the friendship will stand the test of time: "*What is a friend, well if I had to give a definition I'd even say it's people who you stay in contact with up till the day you die; and on that criterion, you probably don't have many friends.*" (man, 40, couple with two children). Looking back, interviewees tend to see the fact that one relationship has lasted the trials of life, while another has not, as proof of a sharp distinction between true friendship and simple acquaintanceship: "...*my best friend! She's the person I can talk the most to. She's the person I've been through the most with. I've known her since the second grade, so that's six years. After this friend there are people who are really fond of you. Then there are mates, then acquaintances... people you like, but if you lose touch with them, well, you lose touch and that's that. But, well ... they're not like family, you know!"* (woman, 22, single). The maintenance of friendships is not, however, deliberate or planned. It is a constant improvisation, where the fact of thinking of the other person alternates with seeing them or hearing from them, in the

name of an ideal-typical friendship which turns around confidences (knowing one can say everything) and being confident that one's friend will always be there to hold you if you need them. This representation is vague (in the sense that it is not precise enough to prescribe any one single kind of behaviour as appropriate) but is nonetheless sufficiently loaded with affect to seem to be the principal motor of reproduction of the relationship through the various trials of life.

To have a few relationships characterised by a high degree of proximity is seen as normal, and as a right. It is in their nature that they should be few in number: *"I think you can have two or three"* (woman, Brittany, 45, couple with two children). People resign themselves quite happily to this numerical limitation because it seems to them part of the order of things, either because they see potential candidates as soul mates being too rare to be able to imagine more (*"I don't think you can keep up close relationships with everyone. It's too ... It'd be too superficial ... I think there are people you can have a deep friendship with, you know ... whereas with others you don't put so much of yourself into the relationship ... because you don't really believe it's worthwhile, as it were—whatever you did, you couldn't change their attitudes, they couldn't change the way you think, so you don't really have anything to give them, they couldn't really give you anything, so ...that's it"* (woman, 40, married with three children), or because intimacy would imply an emotional charge that was too committing. It is therefore presented as rational to concentrate relational investment on a few people, rather than to waste resources by spreading investments out over relationships which would inevitably be superficial. Another justification often cited is that these

investments in close relationships need to be compatible with domestic and work commitments. Intimate proximity, which bears all the traits of these flexible and elective forms of association which we described above, come down in the end to the problem of how to adjust time—how to maintain an intense elective tie organizing absences and moments of conviviality within the limits that allow for the cadences imposed by the home and work ?

The analysis of use of the telephone after a geographical move (Mercier et al. 2002) allows us to construct an ideal-type of durable relationships. Such relationships tend to start in youth in the context of wider collective experiences, then survive the first tests and bifurcations of adult life. They therefore free themselves from the context and from the social relationships in which they were originally inserted, and become individualised into a particular and distinct tie¹⁴. This tie is kept alive through a suitably adapted flow of interactions that take place in various media: face-to-face meetings of conviviality, shared activities, telephone calls, letters, etc. As the people in question get older, interactions become gradually rarer, the friendship becoming more and more a presence sustained in memory. An interesting aspect of this developmental ideal-type is that it brings out the fact that there are different ways of maintaining the friendship link at different phases of the life cycle. The different ages of life involve different modes of “living-together,” each with its periods of separation (which pose the problem of inscription in the memory, making them present “in the head”), and moments of exchange and conviviality. It is significant therefore that the different ages

of life also involve different technical means for communication at a distance and maintenance of the relationship.

Events like a change in the configuration of one's family (e.g. with the birth of a child), or a move to another region constitute critical tests for the social tie. Biographical ruptures stress those forms of living-together that have been smoothed out by routine and conventions. These ruptures threaten the equilibrium of that "right distance" which, before the change, incorporated an equilibrium between absence and interaction, within the framework of a relationship whose quality and status is expressed precisely by that adjusted rhythm of silences and exchanges.

In the case of moves, the fact that the people in question find themselves suddenly separated geographically or suddenly closer redefines the efforts that are necessary to conduct certain kinds of interaction. Face-to-face meetings become more difficult or easier to organise; the cost of a phone call changes, etc. A way of being-together as friends, based on seeing each other with a given frequency and on doing a certain number of things together, may therefore become unfeasible, and no other satisfying mode of relationship may appear. These friends may seem to be "so close yet so distant," and they risk being relegated retrospectively to the role of mere acquaintances. *"Because we only saw each other once a year, and well ... 'What have you been up to?' Well, that's all very nice, but it's not the same. It's that you simply don't share your life any more! When you're close you see each other often, you share masses of things, you know what's going on in the local area. You keep up with your news by phone"* (woman, 35, married with three children).

In the case of a birth, it is change in the status of the family which requires re-negotiation of the parameters of sociability. Since the birth of her first child Aurélie has discovered a satisfying relationship with her in-laws who live in another town, because they have expressed their commitment via fitting modes of exchange: *“If we could live in the same town they’d be really pleased. If we could see each other all the time they’d be over the moon. That’s very different from my parents! Jean’s parents need to hear and see their children. I know it’s breaking their heart not to be near their grandson. And so they often ring up to ask how he’s getting on, and now this weekend we’re going down to see them and they’re jumping up and down with joy. They really are. We’re going down to Lyon soon, and taking Thomas [the baby] and they can’t wait, they keep ringing up: ‘Do you need this, will he want that? ... they’re really over the moon’”. Aurélie’s own parents in contrast do not ring much, and this hurts her. Since her parents have not changed the way they behave, the birth of a child shows up the dissonance in the relationship: absence, presence, and exchanges between mother and daughter have not adjusted to rhythms which are “right” for the new kind of tie. “My parents live nearby, yet they don’t really see Thomas much more than Jean’s parents. And they don’t jump up and down with joy. They’re pleased, but... My parents are very reserved and I’ve often thought—especially when I was pregnant—it’d be nice to have a call from time to time, that’d do me good. Yet it’s often me who rings. I often ring my mother at her work, because I don’t really like ringing home, because the family situation isn’t very ... well, anyway, the fact is that she doesn’t ring me often, and when I left home I minded that a bit. I couldn’t understand how we were supposed to form a new*

relationship if she never picked up the phone to ask how I was getting along. Her attitude was: no news, good news, and that was enough for her, and I couldn't understand that ..." (woman, 31, couple with one child).

What emerges from interviews of this kind is thus a relational difficulty in finding a rhythm in the frequency of contact that suits both parties. Whether close family or friends, people seem slightly uncertain about when they should call, and about what kind of reminders or demands for attention are appropriate. *"It is natural that we should see our friends less now—perhaps because we make contact less often now that we have less time. Or maybe our friends, some of them, don't know quite how to react; they don't know whether they can see us, whether they're disturbing us, whether this, whether that"* (woman, 31, couple with child). Friends whose requests and expressions of friendship are compatible with the new daily rhythms of a couple with a young child are quickly distinguished from friends who do not adapt to a new way of being together or keep to their own rhythms. *"There are two kinds of friends: there are those who understand because they've already thought about what it means to be a parent, and know that changes everything. For example, there are those who ... well, as I said earlier, you can tell by the fact that some people talk loudly and others lower their voice. There are some who continue to talk loud, to joke and shout while the baby is howling because there's so much noise. So there are the young couples and people who go out all the time—people who've never grasped what a baby is"* (woman, 29, couple with one child). Whether the tie will survive or not depends on being able to resolve these forms of discordance in temporal rhythms. Once again, it can happen that a strong friendship will be re-categorized as a simple acquaintance

because agreement on these matters seems impossible. Or, another relationship where such re-negotiation succeeds may be confirmed as a “real” friendship that will probably last all one’s life. This adjustment of synchronisation and co-ordination of the personal rhythms of various individuals inevitably involves power and an element of imposition; such power does not operate at random. Rather than allowing space for innovative social combinations, then, such re-negotiation tends to work as a powerful mechanism for re-imposing social reproduction and established patterns. For example we find that among the friends of a young couple, those who are themselves about to have a child not only share similar concerns¹⁵ but are also subject to similar time rhythms. For this reason it is easier for two sets of parents who have recently had children to adjust to each others’ cadences: with births coming more or less at the same time these cadences are harmonized with each other. This same economy which gives priority to friendships where the cadences are in harmony with each other and where domestic preoccupations (and therefore social trajectories) are similar because they also affect the formation of new ties (Eve, 1999).

At the beginning of this article we introduced the idea of a sociability with three poles, consisting primarily of social networks and the metric or measure that is appropriate to them, i.e., a relational distance or the intensity of the tie; secondarily, of conventional formats of exchange and interaction, and thirdly, of a variety of technical and interactional means of effecting the tie. We then introduced the dynamic of living-together as a principle that underlies the adjustment of interpersonal sociability. We will now go back to the question

of sociability and we will try to identify patterns, stressing two contrasting motifs in a tapestry of interaction where everything is both always in process and liable to come apart at the slightest negligence, delay, or interfering biographical event.

4. Tests of the tie: sociability as a relational economy

Actors' use of the telephone and of written communication is organized in a variety of modes. The first of these describes a modality that we call "relational." In exchanges that take place between close friends (or intimate relatives), long conversations and the exchange of long written texts mark out an interactional space which conquers absence. The people in question give and receive news, reconstructing a shared world because they have not been able to see each other or talk for some time. The telephone call, letter, or e-mail signal an intention; they show that, absence notwithstanding, *alter* is present in *ego*'s thoughts. Gestures, gifts, written messages, and conversations thus help to maintain a tie which is rendered fragile by too much separation. Without pretending to be substitutes for face-to-face contact, these means try to compensate for the rarity of such contact.

This mode of technically mediated sociability is not new. Throughout the centuries it has adapted to the transformation of interpersonal mediations. In the sixteenth century the exchange of gifts between peers, gentlemen, and scholars helped keep in contact "*like the stones of a good building held together by cement*" (cited in Davis 2003, p.105). Erasmus criticized such an

exchange of everyday objects and of game as a way of maintaining friendship, proposing that these gifts should be substituted in humanist circles by the exchange of books, and of scholarly commentary by way of letters. However, his suggestion does not challenge the significance of this circulation of gifts; it is still a question of maintaining a tie “*for fear that, in the absence of each other’s company, good will may languish and even die away, under the influence of the prolonged gap of time and place*” (ibid., p.60). In the nineteenth century, bourgeois correspondence took up the same theme. We might even talk of an epistolary pact—a widely accepted idea that physical separation is a test for the letter-writers to overcome. Letters thus filled in the absence of the other by providing news and signals of presence. Another common nineteenth century theme is that of letters as substituting conversation or chat—that chat which physical separation has made impossible (Dauphin, Lebrun-Pézerat and Poublan 1995). In defining letters as a “conversation between absent friends,” contemporary manuals of writing even presented this kind of attitude prescriptively as the correct one (Dauphin 2000). Today, the telephone is typically viewed as the most appropriate tool for maintaining an intimate tie: “*You use the means of your own times. I think we would have written to each other if the telephone didn’t exist. We would have kept in touch. You use whatever means is most handy ... the easiest thing is the telephone.*” (Woman, 35, couple with no children).

Research on networks of interpersonal sociability and in particular on friendship (Bidart 1997) maps the direction in which patterns tend to change over the life course. For young people, friendship tends to be tied to shared places and group activities. Opportunities to see each other are frequent.

Exchanges mediated by technical means nonetheless constitute an important connective tissue coordinating and synchronizing group activities and meetings. The fact of being “on the list” both expresses the fact that one belongs to the group and makes it possible to participate in group activities (Manceron 1997). Notwithstanding this prevalence of the group, a few friendships do detach themselves from the collective context and are cultivated with their own rhythms. So secondary school students use the possibilities provided by mobile phones and chats to communicate after school with members of their groups—thus interacting in a more elective, individually focused form of sociability, freed from the tyranny of keeping up appearances which often dominates adolescent groups¹⁶. As the years go by, activities diverge and friends move geographically; these changes create a tendency to extract a few privileged ties out of the original mass of collective links, and these dyadic ties are maintained for their own sake. These lasting friendships are thus immediately subjected to the test of biographical events (Bidart and Pelissier, 2002). When such events seem to place a “distance” between friends the use of mediated forms of communication like the telephone can be crucial—and the “relational” modality of interpersonal exchange seems particularly suitable for this purpose.

The telephone, and in particular the “relational” mode of telephone usage is therefore a particularly appropriate tool to help people keep in step with each other and find a new equilibrium between periods of absence and moments of presence, fitting the cadences of everyday life with the rhythms appropriate for intimacy, and thus re-negotiating the “right” distance for the tie. *Well, given*

the enormous mass of work I have to do, I don't notice time passing that much. As I say, it's hardest at weekends. Because everyone tries to work a bit. So you don't see each other, you see fewer people and I miss that, and yes, I spend a lot more time on the phone. And it doesn't always work; it's frustrating, I find being a long way away hard to cope with at the weekend." (man, 20, single).

As we have pointed out, this relational significance has its effects on the form which telephone calls take : these become less frequent but longer (*"You maybe make fewer calls to friends, but calls which last longer"* (man, 30, couple with two children) as people seek to re-establish via words a shared experience despite the distance which separates them¹⁷. *"When you move, you're in a whole new context, a new life ... that takes more communication, to explain it all ... yes, that's what happens, that's what happens, you have more to tell people; so when you move—at least, this is what happened with us—at least during the transition period, there's an increase in your calls and your communication."* (man, 40, couple with two children).

It is interesting to note that this does not only affect telephone interaction. All kinds of interaction take on a different relational mode when a biographical event such as a move tests the relationship. So face-to-face meetings also become more charged with expectations and take on a new form, becoming longer and rarer, more out-of-the-ordinary than they were once. *"It's much more intense. Now for example we'll be seeing each other the whole weekend. They're arriving tomorrow, and they'll be going on Sunday evening. Whereas before, well, we used to see each other for a meal, or we might spend a bit of the afternoon together, then we'd both go back home, or at least in the*

evening. Whereas now you really take advantage of the time you have, you go for walks, we're planning a picnic on Sunday ...you do things you wouldn't have done otherwise, it's funny isn't it? But maybe we wouldn't have done things like that when we were living close .. we used to live 10 kilometres from each other. Or rather, the closest lived just 10 km. away, the others, well anyway it was 'Hey why don't you drop by, come and have a coffee,' then 'Oh well, I'll be getting home, I've got to put the children to bed.' Whereas now there's no putting the children to bed here! So it's ... it's more concentrated ... it's ... it's better. “ (woman, 40, couple with two children). In becoming more of an “event,” more “concentrated,” face-to-face meetings of this kind demonstrate the commitment of participants to the tie and inscribe the relationship more firmly in memory.

There is therefore an interdependency between the tie, the distance, and the form taken by interaction. This leads to empirical regularities that we might summarize in terms of the dictum that face-to-face meetings and telephone calls become rarer and longer, the greater the distance between friends or close relatives. This is a very robust effect in our research results as can be seen in figure 2, which gives data on number of calls and length of calls by geographical distance separating the speakers before and after a move of one of the households. It can be seen clearly that the length of telephone conversations increases with geographical distance and with the infrequency of calls.

[figure 2a here]

[figure 2b here]

So interpersonal sociability here takes the form of a compensatory economy. In their attempts to maintain a tie which is classed, retrospectively, as a strong and lasting relationship, actors reallocate scarce resources like time, personal availability, and physical effort to find an adjustment between absence and moments of interaction and sharing which appropriately expresses the status of the tie. In other words, it creates an equilibrium that is appropriate for a living-together as friends in the new context created by the geographical move.

This relational economy is embedded in the economy in the classic sense of the word. Money constitutes one of these rare resources which have to be allocated in the household, thus necessitating negotiation over what is the collective welfare. The question is not merely a question of accounting in the simple sense—the total of costs of interaction with friends and relatives which appear at the end of the month in the form of bills—but also a question of adjusting different temporal rhythms. For example, to encourage customers to spread out calls, telephone companies usually charge different rates for different times of the day. Financial pressure is thus felt as a cadence imposed without regard to consideration of the needs of a relationship; following a move one is obliged to conform to this external cadence in relations with friends and family: *“well, every so often you really feel you need to make a call, but I hold myself back a great deal, even for calls to my family, because I think what you pay is too much (...) So I think that the phone is a bit scandalously expensive, and it’s not so easy to take advantage of the times when the rates are cheaper. I don’t really take account of those, I don’t*

manage to work it out. Anyway often it's not easy when you want to catch people when they're still up. You know, there are the children, meals and so on and, well, after all that it's getting a bit late so you ask yourself if you can call so late. And in any case when it's late you don't necessarily have the energy to make that warm, emotional call you would have made during the day... So that's the telephone, how we use the telephone. It's not something I talk about often, but it twists me up inside when I think of the bills I pay, and I feel I'm being taken advantage of" (man, 40, couple with two children). In this case the dissonance is expressed by the fact that this interviewee uses the language of social injustice; he sees his right to maintain ties with family and friends as bumping up against the constraints of economic rationality.

The actor of this kind of economic rationality is a "strategic" actor who manages their resources in such a way as to maintain strong ties and make sure they come through the tests imposed by biographical events. Successful optimisation sometimes makes people feel retrospectively that such life events constituted no threat to the relationship: *"they come to see me, I telephone them, moving hasn't turned my life upside down at all, it's hardly changed anything in my relationships with the people I'm really close to"* (woman, 26, single). Some people do in fact adopt this pose of strategist managing a relational rationality, but they do this after the fact, when the test has safely passed. Others take a different line: *"It's true that there are times when we won't telephone or write. But I think we've got a really deep friendship, deep feeling, we really respect each other, value each other as individuals, so that's what it's all about—it's not that you think 'Oh dear, I ought to keep up the relationship'"* (man, 40, couple with two children). In this case the friend is

represented as being so strongly present in the memory that there is no need for any strategy to preserve the tie. Due to this continual presence of the friend *in absentia* in his thoughts, *ego* can delegate the task of maintaining the tie to whatever contacts happen to come along, none of them explicitly aimed at maintaining the tie. The right distance is found via interactions which, due to the faith one has that each is thinking of the other, have no problem in finding an appropriate rhythm which makes up for the physical separation.

5. “Connected” presence

The relational mode just discussed is only one of those which exist in the landscape of sociability via technical means. Living-together has other patterns as well; for example, when the people in question share a sufficient number of places and activities so that there is no shortage of face-to-face meetings. Alongside the mode where long conversations compensate for the days people cannot meet up, there is a kind of “interstitial” communication where there is a proliferation of exchanges and messages regarding the coordination of activities. These act as connecting tissue, and form a suitable terrain for a particular form of mediated sociability: the “always on” presence.

This interstitial communication, which consists mainly of short calls and messages for the coordination of interpersonal activities, exemplifies another pattern of presence and absence—a pattern where absence no longer means silence. In this pattern, actors who are close socially (and often also geographically) are often in contact. With these close people who are seen nearly every day there is the closest intertwining between situations of co-presence and a connecting tissue of messages sent by phone, etc. This pattern

is without doubt currently most widespread among young people whose social life and diversified use of communication resources constitute a suitable terrain for this kind of pattern. But in all cases, shared activities—those that require numerous calls for coordination and synchronization—form the backdrop for this mode of communication. The calls are so frequent that they act as reminders of the other's presence even when the people are not actually together. It is less necessary in this mode that the messages should manifest commitment to a strong tie: the reciprocal commitment is visible in the very frequency of the calls and messages which coordination of shared activities make necessary. In this pattern, therefore, the strength of the tie is lived rather than said.

This interstitial pattern makes heavy use of technological means of communication. It has developed considerably in recent years with the emergence of portable means of communication, which are especially suitable for coordination. It has also been encouraged by the development of various kinds of message systems such as answering services, e-mail, and SMS. These technologies for sending messages loosen the constraints that would otherwise be imposed by the proliferation of communication because they allow the person receiving a message to delay before replying. For the more numerous communications become, the more frequently people have to interrupt the activity they are currently engaged in to fit in with another cadence. The risk is that ties with friends will become institutionalised in the form of expectations and mutual obligations to be constantly available electronically. Mediated sociability currently seems to be countering this risk of control, preserving playful tie management, by making greater use of less intrusive means of

communication. Thus in the last ten years there has been rapid growth of telephone and electronic contacts, but an even more rapid growth of message systems¹⁸.

This development has been accompanied by more subtle changes which crystallize a new way of living-together, where the distinction between co-existence and co-presence becomes thoroughly blurred. Calls and messages become so frequent and their formats so varied that, together with face-to-face meetings, they make up a tightly knit and seamless tissue of interaction—a real “always connected” presence (Licoppe 2002). At the same time short calls and messages become an emotional and expressive resource, and a resource used in a particular mode of maintenance of ties.

Constantly connected presence, in fact, makes widespread use of the possibility of making little gestures where the discursive content is less important than the act itself; i.e., “phatic” communications (Jakobson, 1973). Rather than constructing shared experience by recounting small and large events of the day or the week, one sends little expressive messages, providing sensations or reactions to some event, an emotion, or perhaps asking the person to express themselves in this way. While the exchange of letters in the nineteenth century required people to justify themselves if they had nothing to say, and to fill the page with “I love you” or “you are in my thoughts”, such condensed expressions of intimate emotion become a positive resource in “connected” living-together. In the semiotic of the discourse of love, “I’m thinking of you” condenses presence and absence in the same language act, to

the extent that it reveals both forgetting of the other and waking up from this forgetfulness (Barthes). However, it is the repetition of these little messages that maintain the tie, filling in absence via a sort of incantation. To a considerable extent, the rhythm of the connected tie consists of this insistent psalmody of little expressive messages. In the framework of ties between close friends, they will tend to be as frequent as possible, for the more this presence-at-a-distance is continual, the more it is reassuring in terms of the tie itself.

If the “always connected” presence is most prominent in intimate ties, it is not found only where people live close to each other, or see each other frequently. The availability of new technical means may stimulate this pattern in the attempt to find a solution to the problem of living-together. This is illustrated by a young woman (in her 30s, married with one child) whose best friend is in Britain. They had few exchanges until recently, and only on the initiative of the friend; phoning abroad is expensive, especially for long, conversational calls as is usual between best friends. *“Before I had an Internet connection, it was usually she who called me, I didn’t call because financially it’s very expensive, so I didn’t call, and I’m very lazy about writing letters—writing the letter, getting the paper, then going and posting it and all that, I hardly ever do it. Whereas an e-mail is different: I connect up, I write her a little note and that’s that.”* To write a letter required too much organisational and cognitive investment. With e-mail, the financial cost is no longer a restricting issue, unlike the telephone; the effort necessary to initiate an exchange is minimal, unlike a letter. This makes it possible to have frequent small exchanges. These two friends have effectively turned to a “connected” mode of managing their relationship via their use of e-mail. *“And I discovered how pleasurable it was*

to write to her, because we replied to each other. It wasn't chatting directly but we corresponded, she received my mail, she replied immediately and sent off the reply, and sometimes I would reply back. Sometimes it was just one sentence, that we'd send off like that."

It can also be seen in these examples how "connected" presence, especially in its emotional and expressive register, exploits non-dialogic means of communication such as voice messages, electronic message systems, or SMS; these signal a demand for attention but allow a deferred response. Indeed, sometimes these messages do not even require any response at all, because they authorize a kind of civil lack of attention. In some extreme cases the mere fact of knowing that a line of communication is active and that one is therefore "connected" to the other is sufficient¹⁹. The emotion which accompanies this knowledge makes the tie present to consciousness and the exchange of words superfluous.

E-mail or little messages sent by the mobile phone thus constitute an especially suitable resource for managing relational difficulties and making bearable expressions of aggressiveness in a relationship. "*Little messages make it possible to step back a moment. Even when the person sends a very aggressive little message there is always the telephone between you. It is less violent I would say. You lose your temper less I think and you don't remember it so much as you do with verbal aggressiveness.*" The availability of SMS as a communication resource leads to reassessment of other forms of mediated

communications, making more salient the potential violence inherent in face-to-face or telephone conversation. Text messaging, or SMS, is much used in the management of intimate relationships, making it possible to negotiate very close relationships, and it helps to negotiate difficult passages without breaking the thread of mediated contact or the “connected” tie. *“That happened with my best friend. We weren’t getting on for two or three months and the only thing we did was to send each other SMS, but really horrific ones. I can’t even begin to describe them. He called me up two weeks ago and said ‘Look, I was half joking in all those SMS. I love teasing you and all that because I know you get mad at once ...’ Well, if that had been on the telephone it just wouldn’t have been possible to backtrack like that. You see, it’s not the same ... We let it go as if he had just been taking the piss out of me, whereas if it had been on the phone he couldn’t have pissed me about like that.”* For the following man, in love with a dancer whose hours of work are very different from his (he works in the daytime, she at night), short messages are part of a strategy intended to reassure the other of a loving presence without seeming to solicit a response too embarrassingly. *“Yes, I have sometimes thrown out ... for example ... a phrase like, for example ‘I miss you’—I know that if I say that on the phone there will be a pause afterwards. Not because she doesn’t want to reply but because she takes the sentence for herself and turns it over. So I put it in an SMS. That way at least I’m sure there won’t be a pause afterwards and I won’t have to start the conversation up again. It’s just a phrase and that’s it.”*

There is a fantasy of living-together which conditions uses of the various technical means of communication. As we have seen, what attracts in the

ideal-type of connected presence is the opportunity to reshape a piece of one's interpersonal sociability, where presence is always mediated and actors increasingly use non-intrusive message systems. These thus minimize the risk which is inherent in any interaction. Some philosophers (e.g. Dreyfus 2001) have argued that intrinsic limits exist to the extent that electronic media, and in particular the Internet, are able to create strong ties, and that these have the lot to do with the way participants may be put at risk when using different communication media. The general idea is that the less interactions are embodied, and the less risk there is for participants, the less these participants will reveal of themselves. The right distance in this new configuration of connected presence may thus be a matter of finding a suitable balance between forms of interaction that minimize interpersonal risks, and forms where actors commit themselves enough to be vulnerable and to mobilize all their attention. So instead of the play between absence and co-presence, we would have a play between lack of attention and absorption, between safety and interactional vulnerability.

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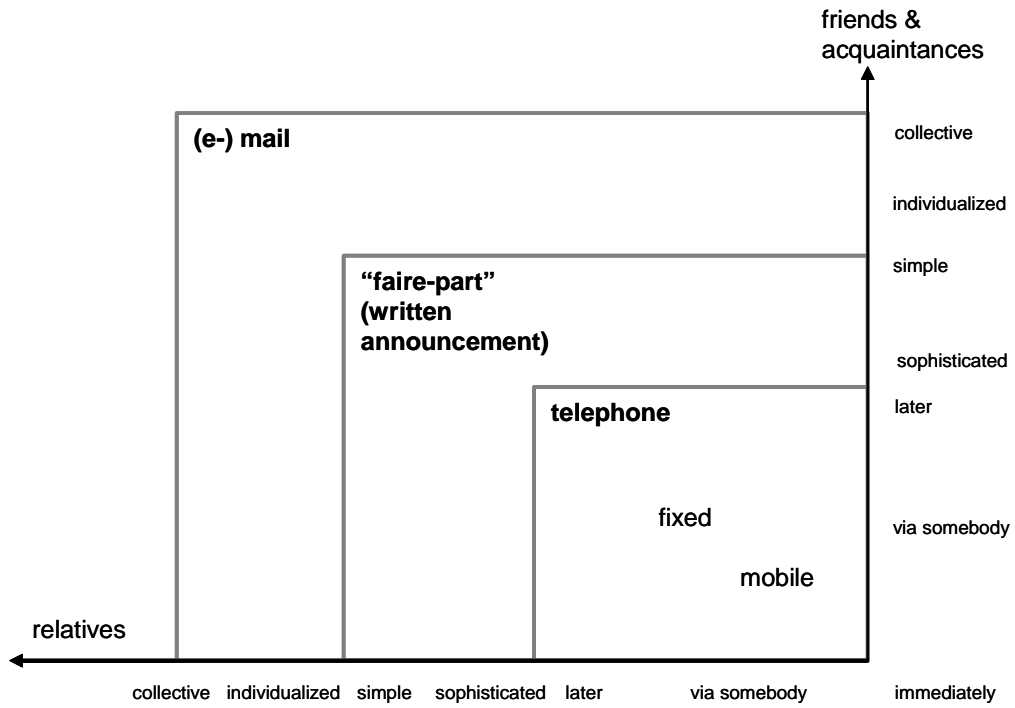
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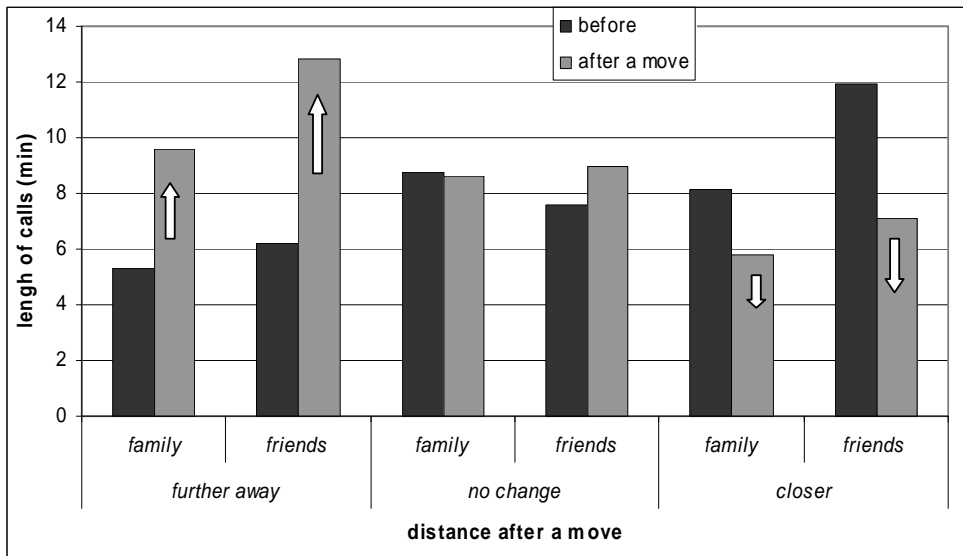
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Chapter 20 Figure 1

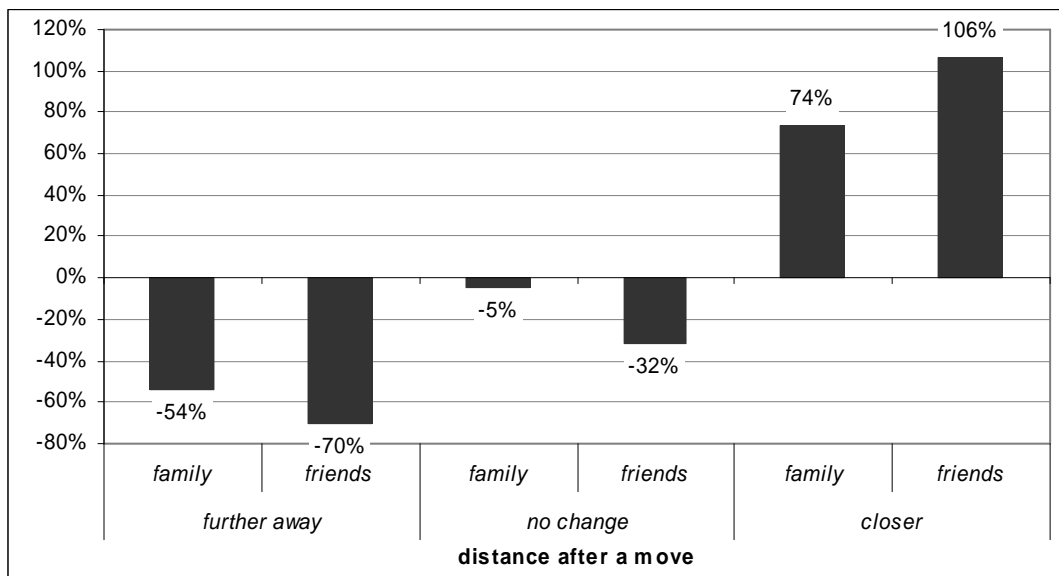


Adapted from Manceron et Leclerc, 2001.

Chapter 20 Figure 2a



Source : Mercier et al. 2002, p. 140

Chapter 20 Figure 2b

Source : Mercier et al. 2002, p. 141

KEY : “Further away” means that people who, before a move, lived near each other (less than 50km.) and now live further away. “Closer” means that people who previously lived further away now, after their move, live within 50 km. of the friends/relatives in question. “No change” refers to ties where the friends/relatives were more than 50km. away both before and after the move. The data regard the telephone traffic of 110 households who moved home, recorded for 16 months (4 months before the move, 12 months after it).

Endnotes

¹ Since the 1980s, a number of French studies attempted to organize these questions around the idea of *uses* of information technologies (Jouet and Proulx, 2000). Although these studies did not succeed in founding a real sociology of uses, they continue to stimulate debate among those concerned with information technologies.

² Critiques of structuralist network analysis (Gribaudo 1999; Eve 2002) have emphasized the tendency present in much formal network analysis to focus on one sphere, often work relations; neglecting the multi-dimensional character of personal networks that tend precisely to criss-cross several social spheres. Analyses which do have data on just one sphere are unable to focus on the tensions and contradictions which stem from playing in several spheres.

³ For example, if we take correspondence in the nineteenth century and the particular case of letter-writing, we find a distinction between the formal, rather stilted register used to maintain relations with a range of kin, and the register of intimacy (Chartier 1991).

⁴ We have shown elsewhere (Licoppe and Smoreda 2000) that systematic analysis of the length of telephone calls brings out variability in the formats of telephone interaction. We showed a continuum existed between “relational” and “interstitial” forms of telephone communication. “Relational” telephone calls are long and relatively infrequent, people taking their time to allow the conversation to develop, to give each other their news and share intimacy.

“Interstitial” use of the telephone in contrast is made up of frequent short calls, for practical reasons such as coordinating activities, or simply to reassure someone of one’s existence.

⁵ Rather than the conventional distinction between written and oral communication, we are thinking here of the distinction recently introduced by Peters (1999) between *dialogue* and *dissemination*. Dialogue in this sense includes quite a wide range of interaction forms, not just face-to-face meetings and telephone conversations but also exchanges via e-mail or Short Message System (SMS) if the exchanges are sufficiently close in time as to evoke the turn-taking of ordinary conversation. Dissemination, on the other hand, covers all those forms of communication where messages are cast into an interactional “vacuum,” without having any certainty of obtaining replies. This is true for messages left on answering machines, or for letters, e-mails, or SMS messages when these written forms are not thoroughly embedded in a game of interactional reciprocity.

⁶ In this it differs from classical economy, where the behaviours of actors are “performed” by mathematicisable theory that relate forms of exchange to each other via price, that just equilibrium price which defines the optimum for a market transaction (Callon 1998).

⁷ Telephone sociability is defined here as that specific part of social life that passes through this particular medium. We aim to show that it is incorrect to frame the discussion on telephone sociability as though it was simply

sociability that happens to make use of the telephone, because it adheres to different rules from sociability in general, as we have defined this above.

⁸ We have developed a platform for the statistical analysis of text suitable for the analysis of Internet communication and “access logs” (Beaudouin et al. 2003). In combination with interviews with users, this data allows us to explore the various combinations of interpersonal exchange practices on the Web.

⁹ Manceron et al. 2002, p.98.

¹⁰ “That does make it possible to keep in touch. I noticed that when, after the birth, we sent an e-mail to more or less all the people we knew, all the ones who had an e-mail address, saying he’s born, he’s super, and all that. I even sent the message to old addresses I didn’t know were still valid or not, people I hadn’t been in touch with for two or three years. And some of those people replied, so we made contact again—whereas I would never have called or written otherwise”.

¹¹ Of course the birth of a child is not the only test of this kind. Other biographical events such as a move or marriage pose similar problems. Cf. Mercier et al., *op. cit.*, 2002, Maillochon, 2002.

¹² Barthes introduced the neologism “idiorhythm” in this context.

¹³ Before the telephone, this pattern helped shape the form that letters took. Some letters “back home” thus constituted a kind of visit to the whole village, in that they included messages for numerous people, trusting that the person to whom the letter was sent would pass these on—or perhaps read the letter out loud in a group (Bruneton-Governatori and Soust 1997). The classic analysis of the personal correspondence of emigrants is of course Thomas and Znaniecki (1918-20). Mercier et al. (2002) describe the way that even today people keep in touch with those back home in another region via a contact who acts as a bridgehead with another community.

¹⁴ Cf. also Bidart and Pellisser (2002).

¹⁵ Our data on telephone traffic show that after birth of a first child, time spent on the telephone with friends who have children exceeds that spent with friends who do not have children (Manceron et al., *op. cit.*)

¹⁶ Dominique Pasquier, personal communication.

¹⁷ Elsewhere (Licoppe and Smoreda 2000), we have demonstrated via a logistic regression that geographical distance significantly increases the length of telephone conversations independently of sex and age of the people concerned. The association holds, whatever type of relationship (kinship, friendship, etc.) links the two people, and whatever time of day the call takes place at.

¹⁸ Pascal Perin, personal communication.

¹⁹ This is the case with instant messaging, where favourite correspondents are represented by an onscreen icon, whose color indicate the availability or unavailability of a given correspondent to immediate written exchange.

Captions

Chapter 20 Figure 1: Media and timing of announcements of birth of a child, by proximity of the correspondent

Chapter 20 Figure 2a: Average length of telephone calls (in minutes) by change in the geographical distance separating the speakers (family and friends)

Chapter 20 Figure 2b: Change in the frequency of telephone calls by change in geographical distance separating the speakers (family and friends)