

Citation:

Petralia, Peter (2012) 'Reach Out and Touch Someone: Technology and the Promise of Intimacy (conference edit)', TAPRA, Kent University, 5-7 September, Online at: <http://bit.ly/QOh4GA>.

***DRAFT***

*Reach Out and Touch Someone: Technology and the Promise of Intimacy (conference edit)*

'These days, insecure in our relationships and anxious about intimacy, we look to technology for ways to be in relationships and protect ourselves from them at the same time.'

(Turkle, 2011: 20)

In 1979 the Bell Companies<sup>1</sup> came out with an advertising campaign that featured the feel-good tag line of 'reach out and touch someone' to promote their long-distance telephone service. In the ads, happy families camping or eating dinner 'reach out' and 'touch' family members who are not able to be with them by phoning them. Gauzy images of children speaking to grandparents, mothers speaking to fathers and smiling teenagers speaking to their friends portray the merits of long-distance telephony as harbingers of a more connected age of always available intimate encounters. The advertising campaigns promised that technology (in this case communication technology)

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<sup>1</sup> The Bell Companies are now called AT&T.

would bring people together and create a better sense of closeness amongst families. It is telling that in most of the television commercials for this campaign the image of a phone is not seen until the end of the ad and even then it is not shown in any particular context. The phone, in these ads, are overshadowed by the smiling images of people 'reaching out and touching' each other, as it were.

Fast forward thirty-two years and major communications companies are still promising to make our lives more satisfying by bringing people closer together via the magic of technology. CISCO, the telecommunications giant, released a series of advertisements using the slogan 'The Human Network' to promote their range of products. These ads are filled with smiling couples, a woman giving birth while her family watches on a video link, a grandmother joining a birthday party for her grandchild remotely, and other scenes of intimate experiences made digital (or perhaps, more accurately, digital experiences wearing the guise of intimacy). The ads end by encouraging us to *be* the 'human network', a suggestion that implies that we are becoming more and more part of a society of convergence where the bounds between the human and the machine are blurred.

The notion of 'the human network' is clearly an evolution of the Bell Companies' earlier entreaty; the ad does not specifically mention technology, although it features heavily in its imagery. Instead, the ad focuses on the intimate connections that these technologies might make possible. I would like to suggest that the term 'possibility' may be useful for making sense of the

changing landscape of intimate encounters we face in this era of technological advances of the social-networking kind. I believe that the ‘always on’ and ‘portable’ mobile Internet, the proliferation of high speed internet connectivity, and the mix of social networks and augmented reality experiences, which define the landscape of the early twenty-first century offer us, as artists and as humans, the possibility of finding new ways of experiencing notions of embodiment. However, they do not *implicitly create* more intimate encounters or even more opportunities for intimacy. To return to the Bell Companies’ tag line – can these technologies *bring us closer together* or do they highlight the separations that exist in our offline/online lives?

In an online debate called ‘Reasonable People Disagree About Connectivity’ between the Dalton Conley, Dean of the School of Social Sciences at NYU and his wife, artist and director of NYUs xDesign Environmental Health Centre Natalie Jeremijenko, we see two opposing views about whether technology is bringing us closer together or eroding our private space. Dean Dalton Conley says:

The more that we’re on stage (posting on Facebook or Twitter, or otherwise broadcasting our daily states and moods), the less of a backstage there is. The boundary between public and private is increasingly blurred. I think of intimacy as selectively granting passes to your personal backstage, where you let certain people see your grumpy side, or get the update on how you’re feeling at 3:00 in the afternoon. But if you’re using social media as a soapbox to post one-to-all, then there’s no backstage anymore.  
(Conley and Jeremijenko, 2010)

Conley’s impression that communicating through social networks, which are inherently one-to-many platforms for expressing ideas, emotions or locations,

is somehow eroding the notion of a private, 'backstage' touches on a growing trend, observed by Sherry Turkle (2011: 58) in her studies with teens that suggests we feel more anxiety and isolation the more we distribute ourselves. In her words, 'as we distribute ourselves, we may abandon ourselves'. Turkle (ibid: 57) also suggests that although the current proliferation of communication technologies is making us feel more anxious and busy, 'the solution will be another technology that will organize, amuse and relax us.' In Turkle's view, then, we see a solution being proposed by the very thing that caused the problem to begin with.

Artist Natalie Jerimejenko, however, suggests that we simply need to learn to take agency or control over how we behave with these new technologies. She says:

We can use technology to connect with one another or to disconnect. The question becomes: To what extent do we exercise that agency? And why don't we feel more in control of it? My position is that we have more agency than we often exercise.  
(Conley and Jeremijenko, 2010)

Jeremikenko is not suggesting that the pervasiveness of these technologies does not exist; she just sees them as another set of configurable elements in our daily lives that require processing. The feeling of being out of control may be a side-effect of the always-on Internet environment that we live in.

Jeremijenko's position seems to suggest that we merely need to make the decision to turn off. I wonder whether it is as simple as turning off. Are we, possibly, becoming more like addicts: aware of the danger of getting

swallowed by the non-stop media-verse, yet still consuming it against all caution?

The difference in thinking between Conley and Turkle versus Jeremijenko frame a landscape of questions that ask whether the current wave of technologies are just another set of tools for us to engage with at our discretion, or if they are actually altering the way we think, behave, educate ourselves, conceive of space and intimacy, and collaborate. Others have argued that in a landscape of mediated interactions that 'place greater emphasis on physically absent others', 'trust has become [a] more valued commodity' than ever before (Raiti, 2007). I want you to keep these perspectives in mind while I describe a pervasive media project called *Fortnight*. In looking at *Fortnight* through the lens of the landscape laid out at the start of this paper, I hope that we might get a better sense of what the impact of digital communication technologies might be and what the potential is that they might offer artists, thinkers and users of digital communication technologies.

Before going into a a further discussion, it is worth noting the many definitions of the word intimate, (and intimacy by proxy). According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the primary definitions of the adjective use of intimate are:

1. a. Inmost, most inward, deep-seated; hence, Pertaining to or connected with the inmost nature or fundamental character of a thing; essential; intrinsic. Now chiefly in scientific use. b. Entering deeply or closely into a matter.
2. Pertaining to the inmost thoughts or feelings; proceeding from, concerning, or affecting one's inmost self; closely personal.

3. a. Close in acquaintance or association; closely connected by friendship or personal knowledge; characterized by familiarity (with a person or thing); very familiar. Said of persons, and personal relations or attributes. Also transf. of things, Pertaining to or dealing with such close personal relations. b. euphem. of sexual intercourse. c. Familiarly associated; closely personal. d. Used allusively of women's underclothing. e. Of a theatrical performance, esp. a revue: that aims at establishing familiar and friendly relations with the audience. Also of a theatre itself.

4. Of knowledge or acquaintance: Involving or resulting from close familiarity; close.

5. Of a relation between things: Involving very close connection or union; very close.

(OED, 2012)

Of particular interest to this discussion are the many references to familiarity, connection, the 'fundamental character of a thing', relations, and closeness.

Throughout this discussion, I am drawing from the definition above to try and understand intimacy, rather than relying solely on generic, instinctive understandings of the word.

*Fortnight* is a two-week long project where up to two hundred participants sign up to receive daily communications via email, SMS, postal mail and twitter, and which invites its participants to try to develop strategies for being creative in the city where they live. This is an extremely complicated project that in itself could fill an entire book, so for this discussion, I am going to focus on a few points that relate directly to the ideas I am exploring here. When describing *Fortnight*, I often say that it creates a dramaturgy of experience for its participants through the use of a whole host of technologies. What I mean by this is that the project orchestrates movements, communications and interactions with the two hundred participants over the two week time, and these order the experience of the participants to encourage them to be more

creative and playful in their daily lives. With *Fortnight* my company, Prototype, wanted to deliver on technology's promise of bringing us closer together as articulated by the Bell Companies. Implicit in creating a project that delivers on this promise is the lingering suspicion that to date that technology has not really lived up to its great promise. My suspicions stem partly from observing people in the city and noticing the way people seem to disengage from their surroundings by entering into what has been called a 'secure media cocoon' (De Caeter, 2004). The secure media cocoon phenomena seeks to describe the way that our mobile devices mediate everything about our experience of being in the city: we check in to Facebook Places or FourSquare, we tweet a photo of something we have just seen, we text as we walk, we check email at the coffee shop. This behavior might actually be causing us to have a total lack of engagement/involvement with our surroundings, despite the apparent relation it creates to real space. In fact, it might be that the always on, mobile Internet simply plots our movements in an abstraction of 'real space'. In creating *Fortnight*, I was wondering whether it was possible to make an art project that would turn this media cocoon into a tool for encouraging engagement instead of isolating us.

*Fortnight* starts on midnight of the first day of a two-week period with every one of the two-hundred participants receiving a hand written letter through their postbox. The letter is a poetic musing on the notion of time (particularly the idea that midnight is a time between two days) and a call for the recipient to spend the next two weeks alert to all the tiny, magical things in their daily lives. They are given the login details to a shared Twitter account in the letter

which allows participants to tweet 'as *Fortnight*'. What this means is that those who are not on Twitter have a way of engaging with other participants via tweeting; it also means that for us as the project organizers, we are able to take a temperature of the experiences that people are having as the project unfolds. We found that the anonymous nature of the shared Twitter account meant that people were really honest and playful, perhaps more so than had they only been using their personal Twitter accounts.

Also in the letter is a small envelope that has a colored, hand-sewn, felted badge which the recipient is asked to wear visibly for the duration of the project. This badge has an RFID chip inside of it, which stands for radio frequency identification. This is the same technology in key fobs that are used to open doors or in touchless payment systems on credit cards. Each day of the project, participants are invited to a location somewhere in the city where they are told to look for an object. They are told to tap their badge on the object to activate it.

For example, on the first day, participants are invited to go to the lobby of a local hotel and to look for a red phone. When they find the phone, they will see a felted square on it for them to tap their badge. When they do, the phone will start ringing. They then pick up the phone and it will ask them a question, which is unique to them. The question will be something like, 'where's the best place in Kent to see two old people kissing', or 'where's the best place in Kent to cry your eyes out?' They can then leave an answer, which the phone records, and go on their way. This little interaction then triggers a series of

other messages to be sent to the participant later in the day via SMS. All of these recorded messages are used in the second week of the project to create a 'fictional' map of the city they are in, which highlights the behaviors people attribute to specific places in their city. At an end event they also get a chance to listen to all of the recordings made. In addition to these little interventions within public spaces in the city, participants also receive messages from *Fortnight* via SMS and email that develop on a set of themes around being present despite the lure of technology to lull us into our screens. All of the messages can be replied to and every message sent is acknowledged by *Fortnight*.

In *Fortnight*, we were using technology, but we never highlighted it. Most people had no idea what was in the felt badge. They came to see it more as a marker that they were part of a secret society of people who were all participating in this strange project. We instead led people to interact with objects that were already in their world, or that had some nostalgic value (like the red phone in the hotel lobby). Chance encounters became a key factor in the way it worked as well: because everyone was invited to the same locations each day, they would bump into each other, or they would just happen to see someone with a badge on their daily commute. This 'orchestrated serendipity' became a key part of the experience.

So what does this have to do with intimacy? The author Clay Shirky has said:

intimacy doesn't scale. You can have an intimate dinner party for six but not for sixty. More is different, and in social settings that difference expresses itself in the logic of clusters.

(Shirky, 2010: 311)

Shirky goes on to explain that in relation to intimacy 'as the system grows, that possibility disappears' because larger groups either become 'an audience' or they break down into clusters of people (ibid: 312). His logic breaks down quickly though when he asserts that 'in an audience, everyone sees the same thing' (ibid). The problem with this logic, of course, is that it assumes that seeing (and possibly by extension, experience) is a monolithic activity that happens the same for everyone. This assumption is fundamentally not true; we all 'see' differently and there is no such thing as an audience (in the unified sense), rather there are audience members (individual people with individual experiences). Although I think he is correct in his assumption that with scale intimacy changes, he may be making assumptions that do not hold true in reality. For example, in *Fortnight* the text messages that people received were all personalized to some degree, so that whenever any of the two-hundred people received a message it felt like it was just for them. And if they replied, every message was responded to by *Fortnight* (me) with a unique response. This encounter seems to fit the definition of 'intimate' in the OED quite closely (OED, 2012). In addition, I was writing twenty-four hours a day for the duration of the project, which enabled a pattern of behavior to emerge whereby people started telling *Fortnight* (me) all manner of incredibly personal details. I, as *Fortnight*, developed intimate relationships with all two-hundred participants and they had the same level of intimacy with me. For example, *Fortnight* was one of the first people that one of the participants told she had cancer. Through advice sought from and given

by *Fortnight*, one participant reconnected with a daughter she had lost touch with. Several participants decided to quit their jobs after consulting with *Fortnight*. In addition, the tenor of the writing of *Fortnight* was often reflective and always personal, the delivery mechanisms of the content meant that participants received each message wherever they were, whenever they were in 'real time', and all of the objects had a homemade aesthetic that conferred upon them a sense of history and relation to a person or people. Virilio would certainly take issue with 'real time' having anything to do with intimacy because thinking about the project this way supposes there is some *other* time which is not real. Of course in the theater, we are constantly concerned with the false, the unreal and the fantastical, so perhaps this opposition works for me only because of the context in which I place my work. In addition, for many participants, it was not a simple creative, game-like project.

Communication from participants tells me that the project was real: it impacted on how they lived their lives for two weeks and it encouraged a sense of introspection and reflection that, in many cases, lasted beyond the project's life.

Shirky's claim that intimacy does not scale is complicated by *Fortnight's* structure because for the participants they were engaged in a one-to-one interaction with an anonymous user (in real-time). For *Fortnight* (me) however, the interactions were structured as one-to-two-hundred, albeit often one-to-one of two-hundred. It seems that in *Fortnight* technology's promise of scalable intimacy at least partially came true. As one participant said:

This is my feeling so far: I have never been involved in a correspondence that is simultaneously so anonymous and personal. It is sweet.

-*Fortnight* Participant

Ironically, through anonymity, intimacy became possible. Sherry Turkle (2011: 88) describes how children sense that robotic toys are 'alive enough'; they create a simulation of 'aliveness' which allows for intimate bonds to be created while still signaling their mechanical nature when they break down, for instance. Perhaps, to borrow from Turkle the encounters in *Fortnight* might be considered to be 'intimate-enough'.

This rub of the anonymous and the personal is at the heart of many of our digital interactions and it makes bare the problem that this paper is dancing around. How does our sense of the personal alter when so much of what might have been considered private twenty years ago is now readily (and permanently) available online twenty-four hours a day? Are my tweets complaining about the inconsiderate passengers on my commute each day personal since they come from me and are related to my experience in the world? Or are they inherently not personal since they are broadcast publicly to anyone who follows me? Perhaps the personal, the intimate can also be public?

During *Fortnight*, participants were also invited to a series of in-person gatherings. But again these were somewhat anonymous in the sense that *Fortnight* was never revealed to be me or my collaborators; *Fortnight* was not clearly present at any of the events, although those of us powering it were

often hiding in the shadows. These gatherings were structured to allow people to meet each other in a shared physical space (if they wanted to - attendance was always optional) and to feel that the tools for the gathering was provided but how it took shape was up to those who came. For example, on the first Sunday of the project participants were invited to a park location just before sunset for a gathering that they were told would end when the sun went down and the music stopped playing. Upon arriving, they will have found that there was a Cellist playing music and a table setup with drinks inviting people to make a toast. This was the first time during the project when everyone was invited to be in the same shared space and it served as an opportunity for people to discuss their experiences and get to know one another. Although they were mostly strangers, being part of this project and wearing one of the felted badges made them less strange to each other. All *Fortnight* had said was that they could show up between certain hours and enjoy a drink, make a toast, listen to some music. What actually happened at the event was much more than the sum of those parts, of course, which is the beauty of a project like this. Participants tweeted photos of each other, exchanged contact details, or just lurked on the edges observing as people moved into and out of exchanges with each other.

This discussion inevitably brings up notions of embodiment (of inhabiting space). Typically, when we think of embodiment in relation to art we think of practices that require a physical co-presence in order to pass on knowledge. For example, many kinds of choreographic practices are considered embodied because you do not learn how to do a dance from reading: you

learn from doing. I would argue that everything any theatre maker does is really in the realm of the embodied as we are nearly always working in a physical space or preparing for work which will be embodied physically eventually. In the case of *Fortnight*, the communications sent to participants were received by actual people in actual space, even though the presence of the sender was remote. Paul Virilio (1993) would certainly take issue with this conception of embodiment. He suggests that when the 'present duration, an accident of a so-called real instant, is suddenly disconnected from its site of origin or inscription, from its here and now, for the sake of an electronic dazzle' via 'telecommanding', a kind of rupture occurs in which the human environment loses control to the electronic, image environment (ibid: 3). He suggests that 'images win over the things they are said to represent' (ibid: 4). But surely a message or image sent has some embodied value when it is received. Jason Farman (2011) discusses the ways that embodiment has changed or is changing as a result of our relationship with technology. In his 2011 book *Mobile Interface Theory* Farman argues, contrary to Virilio that:

...once enacted, embodiment does not always need to be located in physical space. As people connect across networks on a global level, what many are experiencing as they practice the space of the network is embodiment.

(Farman, 2011: 21)

He draws this conclusion partly from ethnographic research done with phone sex workers by Allucquere Roseanne Stone. She discovered that in the case of phone sex workers who are asked to imagine and to describe physical behaviors for their clients, what they were doing was not simply sending descriptions over the phone line. They were sending 'bodies' (ibid). Farman builds on these ideas to discuss the way that we are gradually becoming more

and more attuned to digital media and that, for many of us, our bodies are created across digital media (ibid). Farman goes on to suggest that in fact a distinction between 'real' and 'virtual' is in fact totally misleading in our current conceptions of space (ibid: 22). Very often, the virtual (as in that which is conjured up through technology) is more 'real' than something we might experience physically because our identities are more and more being configured by and for digital media. So perhaps, in the case of *Fortnight* the technology was a surrogate for the kind of intimacy we might experience if we were in the same physical room together.

So, where does this leave us? What does *Fortnight* suggest about the way we think about technology and how it relates to notions of embodiment, reaching out and touching each other, human networks and intimacy? Is this project merely an example of making do with tools available or does it make something more out of the kinds of connections that are possible in a highly connected age? Sherry Turkle (2011: 68) is fearful of 'technology [that] engineers intimacy' because she believes this reduces a relationship to 'mere connection', losing the chaotic and unpredictable humaneness of human relationships. I think she is right to sound a note of caution and to be somewhat fearful. There is no doubt that the proliferation of technology around us is altering the way we behave and how we conceive of time, space and interpersonal relationships. Our expectations in relation to immediate feedback have shifted, for instance in an era where every click is counted and every profile or page view is monitored. I think, though, that it is up to us to make sure that we retain our agency (to borrow Jeremijenko's earlier

assertion) so that we do not find ourselves 'connected but alone' as Turkle says (ibid). Looked at through an even darker lens, the future is bleak:

The destruction of the Berlin Wall? That has been accomplished. The future of a united Germany? The answer is clear. The abolition of borders dividing nations in Western Europe is announced for 1993. What remains to be abolished, and urgently, can only be space and time. As we have just seen, the task is being accomplished. At the end of our century not much will remain of this planet that is not only polluted and impoverished, but also shrunken and reduced to nothing by the teletechnologies of generalized interactivity.  
(Virilio, 1993: 5)

Although Virilio was writing at the very birth of the Internet as we know it, there is a clear warning in his fear of a reduction of value in a world that favors 'generalized interactivity'. It seems to me that we have moved on, for better or worse, into an age where interactivity is deeply ingrained in our daily lives and that we have the power to make these interactions, these technologies, meaningful. We ignore technological advances at our own risk, I think, but we do not have to succumb to them blindly. We can set the rules. We can make them live up to their promises. That is our job as artists, thinkers and humans. The utopian future promised in the CISCO and Bell Companies advertisements is only ever as real as we make it.

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