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Texting the New Habitus: (Re)producing and Negotiating Practices and Expectations of the Texting Medium

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Texting the New Habitus:

(Re)producing and Negotiating Practices and Expectations of the Texting Medium

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by

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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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Introduction

1. Generation txt

These days, it seems that everyone and their grandmother texts. Back in 2008, a popular television commercial series released by AT&T Wireless highlighted the humor and mild surprise of a grandmother texting her friends (Jones 2009:1056). Yet in September 2012, when the Pew Research Center conducted a survey regarding texting usage, the results showed that about 34% of Americans aged 65+ years used their phones to send or receive text messages: the lowest percentage of an age demographic by far, but still a third of the entire group (fig. 1.1). The rest of the age groups show an overwhelming majority of individuals who send or receive text messages on their phones: 97% for those aged 18-29, 92% for those aged 30-49, and 72% for those aged 50-64 (Duggan and Rainie 2012:5).

Texting

% of cell phone owners who use their phone to send or receive text messages

All cell phone owners (n=2,581)	80%
Men (n=1,163)	81
Women (n=1,418)	80
Age	
18-29 (n=451)	97***
30-49 (n=770)	92**
50-64 (n=710)	72*
65+ (n=599)	34
Race/ethnicity	
White, Non-Hispanic (n=1,586)	79
Black, Non-Hispanic (n=434)	80
Hispanic (n=351)	85
Annual household income	
Less than \$30,000/yr (n=690)	78
\$30,000-\$49,999 (n=456)	78
\$50,000-\$74,999 (n=345)	89**
\$75,000+ (n=646)	90**
Education level	
No high school diploma (n=187)	65
High school grad (n=681)	75
Some College (n=679)	85**
College + (n=1,020)	86**

Source: Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project, Summer Tracking Survey, August 7-September 6, 2012. N=2,581 cell phone owning adults ages 18 and older. Interviews were conducted in English and Spanish and on landline and cell phones (1,206 cell calls were completed). Margin of error is +/- 2.2 percentage points.
* indicates statistically significant difference compared with others in same grouping

(fig. 1.1)

Some older individuals who text have self-identified as “reluctant texters” but have started using the medium to stay connected with their loved ones, especially younger family members (Ervolino 2013). “Reluctant” texting is not just confined to older individuals, however. As part of my research, I have observed many individuals at Bard College who deliberately opt-out of the texting world by every means short of canceling their texting plans: consciously leaving the phone in the dorm room when going out, leaving the phone on silent and rarely checking for messages, frequently ignoring messages.

According to another Pew study, 18-24 year old Americans in 2011 sent and received an average of 109.5 text messages per day, with a median of 50 texts per day. Nearly one quarter (23%) of individuals in that same age group admitted to sending or receiving over 100 text messages per day, and over one-tenth (12%) claimed to send or receive over 200 text messages on average per day (Smith 2011:4). In my own study of 18-24 year old Bard students, I did not find any such text-fanatics, although some of those 1 in 10 who regularly send and receive over 200 text messages a day probably attend Bard College. This possibility is especially compelling considering the Pew Research statistics that indicate greater percentages of texters attaining some amount of college education as well as coming from higher household incomes (fig. 1.1); the latter detail being significant due to Bard’s roughly \$46,000 tuition (excluding room, board, and relatively minor fees) (Bard 2013). My informants, however, suggested a lower rate of texting at Bard College than the Pew research indicates, although some of the text transmission numbers may have been underreported. Those whom I found to be relatively frequent texters self-reported a transmission rate of roughly 100 text messages sent and received per day, but the number of texts sent or received for the average texter at Bard was closer to 50 per day.

Furthermore, as I mentioned previously, there was what seemed like a disproportionately high number of Bard students who had texting phones but who chose to participate in the medium reluctantly or very rarely; an average of about 10 texts sent or received per day, but the numbers tended to be very inconsistent, with some days passing with no text activity reported at all.

A factor that could potentially complicate the definition of “texter” is the user’s comfort level with using or at least receiving unorthodox linguistic forms. It is expected that one be familiar enough with the nebulous language style often implemented in the texting medium, including both common shorthand abbreviations and perhaps even locally invented abbreviations that one must recognize as inside-jokes. Otherwise, the content of many texts might be indecipherable to the recipient. There is much carry-over of language forms from the older IM (instant messaging) medium and other CMCs (computer mediated communications) exported to texting, but I have also found a loose relationship between infrequent internet users and infrequent texters. Some members of “generation txt” who did not become familiar with the language forms of the Internet in their younger years expressed occasional perplexity at the seemingly cryptic text messages they receive from time to time.

Another aspect of texting proficiency involves the device itself, and how well the user can text on it. Some of my informants with basic button phones longed for a touch screen, while others with touch screens occasionally reminisced about their old button phones. Regardless of the type of phone one uses, typos are common and even expected to a degree in any CMC, but for Bard students the frequency of sending mistyped messages largely depends on the texter’s familiarity with her phone. It appears that touch screens have a steeper learning curve, but that these students eventually became very comfortable with that interface more consistently than

with full keyboard phones or basic keypad phones. Many informants, however, claimed to accept the positive and negative characteristics of their phones out of necessity and just “deal with it” as one student told me.

Moreover, a user of the texting medium may be judged by her grasp of both widespread and locally shared expectations regarding the many practices of texting. Conforming to the texting expectations of one’s peers may indicate an understanding of the nuances of the medium as well as the relevance of those nuances to the management of certain relationships. To expand on the issue of typos, another major factor determining their presence in a text message is the user’s texting partners’ willingness to permit such mistakes. Some users might purposely leave specific words misspelled to get a laugh out of the recipient. Others might proofread every text they compose for one specific recipient because they know she is a stickler for grammar. But conforming to new practices introduced by texting may sometimes clash with other social practices. For instance, texting a distant friend while one is hanging out with another group of friends is a practice many would consider unique to texters; that is, not very unique at all considering the popularity of texting and the rapidity by which the medium has changed the meaning of “normal” social practices. Indeed, a major focus of my research involves the tensions between old and new social expectations, and how both texters and nontexters manage their interpersonal interactions in this period of vast and rapid cultural transition.

So who is a texter? Does simply owning a phone with a texting plan make a person a texter? What about those individuals who text using other people’s phones? Is there a threshold average number of texts one has to send or receive daily to be considered a texter? And how can we distinguish between frequent texters and infrequent texters? Do these categories even make

sense, or are the variables too context-dependent to make hard divisions between texting practices? Because there are so many factors to weigh, and so much complexity in between all the factors, it makes little sense to list all of the different levels of proficiency of each participant in this study. Therefore, I will judge individuals as different levels of “texters” by the frequency of their use, and I will instead analyze these issues of fluency, dexterity, and familiarity with the expectations of texting in terms of the fluctuating ways “texters” manage their time, attention, interpersonal relationships, and relationships with their devices.

2. “A Place to Think”

Bard College, where I conducted my fieldwork, is a liberal arts college of nearly 2000 undergraduate students coming from the various metropolises, suburban locales, and rural areas spread across the United States and around the planet. The main campus sits on the eastern bank of the Hudson River and sprawls across 540 acres of woodlands and grassy fields, with a combination of old stone buildings, new modern-style dorms, patches of ground covered by cigarette butts, large semi-permanent outdoor art installations, and other signs of human activity scattered throughout the campus. It is a huge “parklike setting” inhabited primarily by young people in diverse dorm situations; from an old estate’s manor to (stationary) mobile home trailers, along with more traditional dorm buildings (Bard 2012). The majority of these undergrad dorms are located in the areas informally but commonly called “north campus,” “central campus,” and “south campus,” along with a handful of others in grey areas slightly off of the north-south orientation.

These main areas of campus can be further broken down into groups of dorm buildings clustered together, more-or-less forming “villages” or “neighborhoods” in which many students often have multiple friends living nearby. Although there are physically active students at Bard who regularly walk across campus to attend classes, music lessons, club meetings, meals, etc., and despite the fairly consistent campus shuttle that comes by roughly every hour, there are many students who rarely leave their neighborhoods for anything other than the necessities (such as the examples above). Thus, the majority of inter-village socializing happens either between classes and at meals during the week, at major weekend events like dance parties, or in intimate dorm settings with a few friends who often live nearby.

Due to the combination of a small student body and widespread introversion, the average student may know most of the faces on campus but will frequently avoid eye contact with acquaintances and familiar faces when they pass on the path. I have heard students say that it is a New York City-esque social logic, but transplanted in an extremely open and rural environment. Hence, students frequently describe each other (and themselves) as “awkward” or “weird,” referring just as much to their peers’ eccentric clothing styles and personalities as they refer to the widespread social anxieties that are often interpreted as unfriendliness. On the other hand, it seems that many students celebrate the “weirdness” of Bard in a variety of ways, perhaps culminating in the wildly popular Surrealist Training Circus show at the end of each year, which features extensive use of giant puppets, acrobatics, fire-breathing and fire-poi, and the ceremonial burning of an effigy at the end.

Students as well as professors and other staff sometimes refer to the existence of a “Bard bubble,” a semipermeable barrier between the campus culture and the outside world. Beyond the

eccentricities and anxieties of Bard students, many (but by no means all) students come from relatively wealthier backgrounds; it is therefore no coincidence that in every classroom, MacBooks seemingly always outnumber PC laptops. This is not to say that *all* students at Bard come from positions of privilege; indeed, roughly half of the students receive financial aid from the college (Bard 2013). It seems that at least some students of more modest means tend to “convert,” as some students say, to Apple products, the widespread adoption of MacBooks being one particularly visible example.

The college’s motto is “a place to think,” which in recent years has attracted a counter-response from students and faculty urging to more critically examine the ivory tower mentality of Bard and to engage more actively with the local community, broader socio-political issues, and one’s own interests. There are several prominent activist and radical groups on the one hand, but there are still many students who retain an apathetic or aloof demeanor as well. Perhaps Bard College contains just as many social tensions as any other relatively insular place, but the students here are generally far more aware of these idiosyncrasies than other people I have met elsewhere. Thus, it is difficult to determine whether texting at Bard is a noticeably different experience, and to what extent my findings can be generalized to reflect trends and practices in the broader texting culture outside of this liberal arts college.

3. Methodology and Outline

I conducted my fieldwork almost exclusively at Bard College during the 2012-2013 school year. All of my informants presented in this project were between the ages of 18 and 24 at the time of my writing, and all of them were Bard students. Some of these informants are

friends or acquaintances of mine; a few I sought after specifically; a handful sought after *me* upon hearing about my project; and many were simply random students whom I asked about their texting or cell phone experiences out of the blue, usually during or right after they had performed a texting practice that caught my attention. These interactions would occur in a variety of locations, including the library, the dining hall, weekend party events, my dorm building's study room, etc. I quote very few of those impromptu informants, but they helped me form a broader and fuller picture of texting at Bard. Instead, most of the quotations in this project are from individuals I know personally to varying degrees. I acquired many of these quotations in formal and informal interviews, although some were spoken around or to me in spontaneous conversation. Consent to use these quotations and to portray particularly valuable informants (with names changed) was primarily acquired by oral means, although I acquired written consent for my interviews.

Categories for texting usage are relevant to my study because of the correlation between greater texting usage, stronger feelings of the device's incorporation into one's own body, and a deeper sense of belonging to a broader social body. The disparity between the national and Bard texting averages complicates the definition of "texter" at this institution. Therefore, for the purpose of clarity in this study, I will occasionally refer to those Bard students 18-24 years old who send and receive roughly 100 text messages or more per day as *frequent* texters, those who send and receive about 50 texts per day as *average* texters, and those irregular users who send or receive 10 texts or less per day as *infrequent* or *rare* texters, depending on the context. I also had one participant of this study who did not have texting in his phone plan at all, and so I will occasionally refer to him as a *nontexter*. For the most part, however, I will frequently refer to

“the texter” as a hypothetically quintessential frequent or average texter who exhibits the specific practices I describe when I use the term, unless such distinctions need to be made.

This project is primarily composed of four chapters. The first chapter introduces Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*, that particular set of practices and cultural norms that members of a particular habitus reproduce just by participating in them. It also introduces another term, *feedback*, which partially describes the means by which habitus functions, but which also describes several other characteristics of the texting medium, as well as the practices and norms associated with it. Moreover, the first chapter examines the phenomenological consequences of incorporating a mobile phone to the body via habitus, including the ways in which such an incorporated device acts as a prosthesis, at times functionally transparent to the user.

The second chapter is an examination of the texting medium’s connections to the media of speech and writing/print. Borrowing theory from Erving Goffman, I argue that texting can be a form of talk, albeit with peculiar differences, many of which arise from the visual and asynchronous characteristics it shares with writing/print. This particular combination of attributes generates a wholly new medium which in some ways resembles its parent media, but which has socially and phenomenologically transformative powers beyond the sum of speech and writing/print. I also borrow the term *face* from Goffman, which is composed of one’s own self-image, the image others form of one, and the dispositional stance one takes in a social encounter, all of which are subject to change depending on the circumstances. I then introduce N. Katharine Hayles’ concept of *flickering*, a quality of digital text that causes it to become unstable, thus making it susceptible to rapid and extensive changes. Furthermore, I introduce the

terms *instrumental texting* and *chatting*, the two primary uses of texting, as well as the *perpetual state of talk*, which may be a unique feature to the texting medium.

The third chapter attempts to form a theory of presence that is principally dependent upon the direction of one's attention. I argue that what is most present to the texter is whatever content to which the texter is primarily attentive. The texter consumes the *streams* of content via *channels*, and the texter's attention is the mechanism by which these streams are consumed. A consequence of this conception of presence is that *mediated* or *extended* presences may be functionally more present than *immediate* presences to the texter. With this framework, I demonstrate the impossibility of telepresence through texting, as such a sensation requires sustained attention, as well as social and sensory feedback. I then revisit Hayles' *flickering* phenomenon and use it to describe the texter's practice of rapidly switching between attention channels. I also introduce the concept of *staggered timeframes*, which are the temporal dimensions of these channels, as well as the texter's perpetual condition of belonging to multiple staggered timeframes at once. I end the chapter by introducing Adriana de Souza e Silva's term *hybrid space*, which is a social space defined by its blend of physical and digital components.

Finally, the fourth chapter is an investigation into some of the social expectations around the texting medium, as well as the tensions that may arise from conflicting expectations. I look into the connection between intimacy and informality, and how these characteristics are associated with texting. I also examine the ways in which the texting medium may be used to maintain a sense of distance, both emotionally and physically, and how some texters manage the relationship between the distant and the immediate. I revisit *flickering* once again, focusing on the reaction of co-present peers to the practice of flickering between the mediated and

immediate, as well as the texter's own occasional exhaustion from flickering between too many channels. I then describe the pressure many Bard texters feel to acquire an iPhone, why this pressure exists, and how some non-iPhone users manage interactions with iPhone users. I close my final chapter with reflections on an interview I conducted over text message, reexamining a few of the tensions described in the rest of the chapter.

Chapter I The Feedback Loop

1. Culture as Medium: Recursive Relationships and Habitus

“Culture” is “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Tylor 1871:1); or “...a part of the distinctive means by which a local population maintains itself in an ecosystem” (Rappaport 1970:233); or “...a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life” (Geertz 1973:89). All of these definitions refer to culture as something simultaneously external to and an inherent part of the individual member of society. Moreover, they all refer to it as being something transmitted and commonly shared between individuals in a society as well as containing the means to exert self-expression and will; culture *mediates* the condition of living in a society. If a “medium” is that which mediates the interaction between human beings and the world, then one could say that *culture is a medium*, a macro-medium composed of other media, as it were.

We produce, reproduce, change and use our media, but in turn media also change us—the way we use our bodies, our behaviors, and our thought-patterns—not only at the moment we use media, but persisting for as long as we perform the habits of media use. This is the same principle that governs the recursive relationship between individuals and their respective cultural-environmental conditions, which Pierre Bourdieu calls *habitus*:

The structures constitutive of a particular type of environment...produce *habitus*, systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively “regulated” and “regular” without in any way being the product of obedience to rules,

objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them and, being all this, collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor. (Bourdieu 1977:72, original emphases)

Individuals of a social environment perform under the loose structure of their habitus, the conditions of which they unwittingly reproduce just by performing within them. Habitus functions as a feedback loop: a system that feeds its output back into itself as input. For such a new medium as texting, however, the original invention and popularization of the medium as well as the habitus that preceded it is still present in the memories of many participants within the new texting habitus. This is especially true for those over the age of 24 who experienced the older habitus for a longer period of time, but it's also true for my informants of the younger generation who grew up as the medium was popularized.

Indeed, the generational group I am focusing my study on, college students aged 18-24, were adolescents or pre-adolescents when texting began to be popularized in the United States through AT&T's partnership with the reality show *American Idol* (Jenkins 2006:59). My informants remember public pay phones, they remember remembering several phone numbers, they remember a time before having one's own cell phone was "normal." Yet members of this particular generation have also adapted to the new habitus of texting much more comfortably than members of their parents' generation, although they might remember when "person and machine stared uneasily at each other across the desktop" (Souza e Silva 2006:20), a relationship that was probably less uneasy for many of them than for their parents. Furthermore, members of this younger generation were responsible, if not for originally importing the linguistic forms from other CMCs to the texting medium, then at least for popularizing such forms and for playing an indispensable role in producing the current habitus of texting. These young early

adopters/adapters to the medium negotiated with the old habitus (often presented by parents or teachers) to unintentionally help produce new norms, practices, and dispositions around this new medium. They and other actors (especially the older generations who have adapted since the earlier years) modified and adjusted the nascent pre-habitus in the years that followed as texting was continuously popularized amongst all generational groups, but the habitus that has now formed (and is still forming) was necessarily produced by those early experiments of inter-generational negotiation and practice.

It is thus no surprise that this generation has been referred to as “generation txt.” Several informants with whom I spoke expressed to me that though in many ways they feel that their generation is an amalgamate of very disparate cultures and experiences, one of the things that does make them feel connected with their peers—for better or for worse—is the technology that many of them have grown up with, adapted to, and helped shape, emphasizing texting and the Internet as the principal examples. Especially revealing for this sense of generational identity is that some members of generation txt who lean closer to the luddite side of the spectrum feel disconnected from their peers precisely because they have not fully adapted to the new habitus through which most of their peers function and make meaning of social situations.

But many of these generation txt members who prefer not to participate in the new habitus own mobile phones anyway. Intra-generational pressure from their peers to acquire a cell phone and participate in the texting medium is not the only force these individuals face. Increasingly, those early inter-generational conflicts between parents and youths have developed into widespread adaptation to the texting medium from all age groups. For some young resisters of the new habitus, however, this means that their parents now pressure them to have a phone,

sometimes even buying phones for their children despite the protests they encounter. One informant described to me how when she had to replace her last phone, she had begged her parents for “anything but an iPhone.” Her parents, however, being “Apple-obsessed” as she put it, “forced me to get an iPhone,” a device that she usually—but not always—carries with her.

Some students may resist texting, but many of them have nevertheless adapted to the new habitus of their peers. Willard, the only informant in my study to not have texting in his plan, considers himself “archaic and antiquated,” citing his lack of a texting plan as evidence, “among other reasons.” To Willard, texting is something he will have to reacquire “eventually,” probably for employment, since it is “normal” (his words) to be easily contactable. Touch screens frustrate him, however, and he would rather wait to adapt to the next new interface. For now, the combination of Facebook, email, and phone calls are enough to stay in contact with the few people he wishes to interact with distantly. Despite his lack of texting activity, Willard also expressed to me that “it very rarely bothers me, any of the phone things that people do” and that “I’ve just learned to like stop paying attention when someone gets on their phone and just wait.”

Another informant, Fiona, has also adapted to the habitus of her peers without yielding completely to the new norms. She admitted to me that she has a texting plan “just in case,” despite very rarely sending or receiving texts; in fact, she claims to send more letters to her friends than she makes phone calls, which in turn she does more than text. Fiona told me that she is not always prepared to interact with other people, especially in the event that she is in her room—her private space for reflection—and she receives a text message or a call. She would also “much rather go out and talk to people face-to-face” if she feels the urge to interact with others and simply does not understand why anyone would text other than out of necessity. Meeting her

friends face-to-face, however, often leads to at least one instance during the encounter in which her friends are on their smart phones and Fiona is left out of the activity. So she has learned to adapt to the new rhythm: although she would “sometimes, but not regularly” carry around a novel before her friends got iPhones, it was not until that turning point that she started to “pull it out for five minutes at a time.” She continued:

[Before,] I would only pull it out at a coffee shop when I was alone or something, but whenever they would be texting I would read it, and I can read and talk at the same time pretty well, but I feel like I don’t know whether that’s being there or not.

Because of the practices of her friends in their shared social space, Fiona began to adopt the rhythm of her friends, switching her attention between her book and her immediate social situation, just as her friends would toggle between their phones and the same social situation. In addition, Fiona’s confusion about herself “being there or not” when reading, compared to her friends whose attentions are elsewhere via their phones, indicates to me an unresolved internal conflict with which she felt uncomfortable even considering. While texting has radically reconfigured social space in such a short amount of time, the medium has gained such a degree of normalcy that many individuals socially involved with texters have adapted to these expectations, even when it makes them uncomfortable or disoriented.

2. Extension of the Body: Sensory Awareness and Bodily Incorporation

A consequence of habitus is that any medium that a human being habitually uses may be absorbed into that person’s sensory awareness. While media are sites of habitus-production, individuals also use media to *mediate* their interactions with the world (including with other human beings and reflexively with the self, as in the case of a mirror), and because some media

become so indispensable to the actions and thoughts that compose these interactions for some individuals, the sensitivity of the body to such media may almost approach the level of the five organic senses, which one can interpret as part of the human body's original primary media. For example, if a person texts on her phone frequently and regularly, she could possibly develop a sensitivity for the ringtone, the particular resonance of the phone's vibration, the shape of it in her pocket, etc. In 2010, an empirical study led by Anthony Chemero, a cognitive scientist at Franklin & Marshall College, had subjects use a computer mouse rigged to malfunction in the middle of the experiment. When the mouse malfunctioned, "the computer was no longer part of their cognition." But when the mouse began working properly again, subjects' cognition "return[ed] to normal," thus demonstrating that, in the words of Chemero, "'You're so tightly coupled to the tools you use that they're literally part of you as a thinking, behaving thing.'" (Keim 2010). To paraphrase Marshall McLuhan, media are extensions of the self, a part of which I take to mean bodily awareness through the sensorium (McLuhan 1964:7). Just as the five organic senses mediate between the self and the external world by demanding the mind to automatically process the environmental changes they pick up (stimuli), so does the medium which has been absorbed into one's sense of body mediate by demanding the mind to be aware of the changes made within or upon the medium. Like with habitus, this incorporation of a medium to one's sensory awareness often occurs without the user's intention to do so.

Furthermore, media can be incorporated into the body as an extension not only in terms of sensory awareness, but also as an extension of the functions of the body. Others have used the term "prosthesis" for this kind of bodily integration of a medium (Allison 2006:165). This does not mean that the medium must necessarily be physically, literally incorporated into the human

body, like the subdermal microchip implants some have feared will become a future means of monetary transfer. To have one's credit card in a consistent place *on* one's body and to be able to pull it out and use it without having to consciously recall where it is or how to activate the monetary transfer is enough to consider the credit card a part of one's bodily awareness. That small piece of plastic and magnetic strip already lives inside the mind and muscles of the frequent user. When one uses a medium frequently enough, one's body develops muscle memories and one's mind develops mental shortcuts to most efficiently use the medium. One can observe this phenomenon by the example of the mechanic who intuitively knows that this *size* wrench must be used to loosen a bolt, and how deftly the mechanic uses the wrench as if it is an extension of the hand; or the knitter who stitches yarn with such speed and accuracy without even looking, using only the feeling of the yarn and needles and muscles in the fingers; or the baseball pitcher who intentionally sends the ball in a specific trajectory, seemingly exerting control even after the ball has left the hand. Indeed, the phrase "be the ball" or any other variation has by now become a cliché with an almost spiritual connotation, that one must imagine oneself as the ball. The meaning, however, need not be so mystical, but could rather be interpreted as an imperative to feel the ball seamlessly integrated with the muscles of the hand, the arm, the torso, and the legs.

Adriana de Souza e Silva describes this medium-incorporation in another way, using two different senses of the word "transparent." The first definition refers to Mark Weiser's concept of "a device that doesn't frequently require our attention and that can be in the background of our lives." As far as Weiser's conception of transparency goes, the cell phone has passed the threshold level of ubiquity for it not to seem out of place in most environments. Thus for Weiser,

the medium is incorporated into the ambient environment, not into the body. Depending on the phone, however, it may be functionally transparent but socially very visible. When the iPhone 5 was released, for example, I would catch myself and many of my peers pointing out those few individuals on campus who had acquired one. Even with older models, it is common at Bard for students to comment on unique iPhone cases amongst themselves and to the owners, regardless of whether or not the owners are using their iPhones at the time.

Souza e Silva's second definition of the word "transparent" refers to how "natural" the use of a device seems to the user. In this second definition, a device is "transparent" if the user does not have to specifically focus on or struggle with the medium, but instead be able to seamlessly perform the tasks she intends (Souza e Silva 2006:26). For Souza e Silva, the idea of "transparency" requires the medium to be so well incorporated into the body that the user barely notices it at all. Many texters in my sample do feel their phones as natural extensions of their bodies, comparable to the transparency of their feet as they walk or their fingers as they text. One particularly well-"connected" informant of mine named Cindy once rummaged through her bag for a moment while we chatted at the shuttle stop before saying, "What am I even looking for? Phone?" at which point she realized she was holding her phone in her hand: evidence of how deep incorporation of a prosthesis to one's body can cause the prosthesis to become transparent, even while holding it in one's hand. Another informant, Paul, even admitted to texting his girlfriend frequently in his sleep! When he does, they are either nonsensical messages reflecting his half-conscious state or "I love you," and he remains unaware of his actions until the morning after when he either finds his phone in his hand and checks his messages (a practice

partially formed by his sleep-texting tendency) or when his girlfriend wakes him up via text or phone call and tells him.

But just as one is more likely to notice one's own otherwise "transparent" body when one is sick or injured or uncomfortable, so is one more likely to notice the metaphorical "seam" between own's body and own's device when the device is malfunctioning or somehow out of the user's control. As Souza e Silva succinctly puts it, "A tool, when properly used, disappears as a function of its use, moving to the background of our attention" (Souza e Silva 2006:21). I would alter her claim to say that a tool, when properly used in the hands of a person comfortable with the tool, becomes a seamless extension of the body, afforded a comparable level of awareness as any other part of one's biological body. The inverse of my claim, however, implies that a dysfunctional tool will be as immediately present to one's attention as a dysfunctional part of one's body. The average texter using a basic cell phone might accept her device enough for its basic quality to be a background concern until it (and she) is challenged to perform a task that it (and she) cannot do. When I asked my informant Tylor if he ever feels too reliant on his phone, he responded, "Only when it's not functioning properly." The average or frequent texter is hyperaware of her phone malfunctioning precisely because she expects it to work properly, and it is jarring to experience a medium so phenomenologically close to her working improperly. Some of my informants have even higher expectations for the functionality of their prostheses than for their own biological bodies because they know exactly what to expect from their prostheses. I myself have lost hundreds of saved files in a hard drive failure—files ranging from poetry to class notes to major essays that I had written and accumulated for years—partially due to this distrust of my own biological memory and reliance on what seemed to be a more dependable

medium. But when it malfunctioned, it was like losing a large chunk of myself to what felt like my hard drive's betrayal. I suspect this sense of betrayal is part of the reason why some texters prone to angry outbursts tend to throw their phones when upset, precisely to disown or amputate, in a sense, the offensive extension from the body.

On the other hand, there are also Bard texters who rarely if ever feel their phones as seamless extensions of their bodies. For some of these individuals, the "quirks" of their cell phones may be too apparent for the experience to feel seamless. Though some texters are so comfortable with their phones that they do use them as if by second-nature, others struggle with the interfaces of their phones to perform relatively simple tasks, such as typing a message without typos on the first try. Other texters at Bard College have more of a problem with the texting medium itself, saying that the cell phone is over-demanding and interruptive, and thus that the device exerts more control over the user than the user exerts over the device. In this way, if the user does feel the phone as an extension of the body, the device becomes almost like a possessed limb, out of control of the person to whom it is attached. Some participants spoke about intentionally leaving their phones in their rooms when going out, preferring to use it in lieu of a landline. Others mentioned that they may check incoming messages, but will often not send a reply unless a reply is necessary. For example, one may receive a message coordinating a meet up at a specific time and place. For these reluctant texters, sending a response acknowledging the reception of the original message, even with a simple "ok," is often felt to be unnecessary. Some of these students feel that text messages are already too interruptive, and so they would rather not reply with an interruptive and unnecessary acknowledgment in kind, especially because such a response might encourage more interruptive engagement with the distant partner.

The phone is not transparent for these texters because of its integration into the senses and body; instead, some of these users actively separate themselves from their phones to intentionally ignore its demands.

Whether or not users feel the seams between themselves and their devices, and whether or not those devices are present or absent to the users, the relationships between the users and their devices still have transformative consequences for the users and for the broader cultural environment. The claim that “media are extensions of the self” can also be reversed to “any extension of the self is a medium.” Though this may seem to be a subtle distinction, this definition of “media” opens up the term to more than just a means of passing or recording information, but to the classical Latin *medium* meaning found in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: “middle, center, midst, intermediate course, intermediary.” A part of the traditional definition is that a medium stands *between* the two interacting entities, a characteristic that is perhaps more obvious to those users less comfortable with their devices. A second and more subtle definition of the word, however, may also mean that the medium partially exists *in* the user—in the muscles, the mind, the *habitus*—as well as existing externally in the broader cultural medium of which the user is a part. The combination of these two characteristics of media implies that any extension of the self exists partially within as well as outside of the self, exposing the feedback loop of human-to-human and human-to-machine relationships that produces the fluctuating cultural conditions in which medium and user exist.

3. Servomechanism

Referring to how young Narcissus fell in love with his own reflection in a pool of water,

McLuhan writes:

This extension of himself by mirror numbed his perceptions until he became the *servomechanism* of his own extended or repeated image. The nymph Echo tried to win his love with fragments of his own speech, but in vain. He was numb. He had adapted to his extension of himself and had become a closed system.
(McLuhan 1964:41; emphasis added)

The second definition of “servomechanism” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and the one that cites this exact passage of McLuhan as a historical usage of the word, is defined as follows: “A non-mechanical system that is characterized by self-regulating feedback, esp. in *Genetics* and *Physiol.*” To McLuhan, the Narcissus myth is a cautionary tale not necessarily of narcissism as it is popularly known today, but of unawareness of the effects media may have on ourselves that may lead to distortions of self-image as well as the distortions of one’s worldview which result from narcissism.

To my mind, there are at least two different ways one can become the servomechanism to one’s own media. The first is in habitus, as I have explained. Not only does the texter learn the “normal” practices by observing her peers, but these practices also become normalized by the texter’s own habitual use, thereby guaranteeing the continual use of the medium in a feedback loop. In fact, before I began this project, I had not considered it particularly odd when an acquaintance would take out her phone during a lull in conversation. These practices are thus self-regulated and self-perpetuating, the effects of which, in the case of the ubiquitous and mobile cell phone, touches upon all aspects of the texter’s life. I used to occasionally pretend to

text when I walked by strangers to avoid eye-contact; now that practice of pretending has turned into actual browsing on the Internet on my smart phone when I walk anywhere.

The second way servomechanism can occur is when one engages one's medium in an emotional relationship. Any perceived wants of a medium must actually be the wants of the user of the medium or other human beings who have interacted with medium. This human-device relationship in actuality is an internal "relationship" with the self in which users project parts of themselves onto their devices without realizing it. It can seem to the user, however, that a device has desires, and moreover, that in order to maintain the relationship, the user must fulfill those desires. During an interview, Cindy described how she sometimes feels like her phone has emotions:

Cindy: Yeah. I guess sometimes when it's on my dresser and I'm in my bed like on the computer or whatever and I just look over and it seems kinda sad, so I guess—(laughter)

Dan: Give it a little attention?

Cindy: Yeah. It needs to be held.

Another informant, 21 year old Myra, sent me a "blog post" (for a blog she does not have) that she wrote shortly after Halloween 2011. She had lost her phone the night before at an enormous Halloween dance party at Bard, and recorded the experience of finding and retrieving her broken phone the day after. An excerpt from her piece follows, left unedited to help convey her thought process and emotional state while she composed it:

[...]With a broken, flickering screen and scuffed body—having fallen unnoticed and been trampled to death—my phone was still managing to vibrate from futile unreadable texts—it reminded me of WALL-E after he got the shit kicked out of him in the movie. I gingerly scooped it up in a way that in other circumstances might warrant a whispered "there there".

So why is it that every time I lose a phone I am at once overcome with despair.?I know, I know, cell phones can't feel, but with movies like WALL-E and the

constant production of eerily intelligent “smart” phones how can I not treat technology like its own species? ---talking GPS, Siri

Maybe the reason why I think of my phone as more of a pet than a communication device is that my relationship with cell phones is not unlike the one I used to have with my Tamagotchi when I was younger. I feed (charge) it, play with it (texts, photos, etc.) and it chirps at me when it needs attention. Also, both my phone and Tamagotchi took a lot of accidental abuse—whether I would drop it, misplace it, or forget about it until it’s nearly dead and I suddenly have to coax it back to life. So when I found my phone, abandoned, I couldn’t help but feel similar to a negligent mother turning on her Tamagotchi again and finding her sad little robot friend on its last legs.

Although Cindy’s response came out of an interview question about the needs of a cell phone and the relationship one has with the device, Myra wrote her reflections independently and offered to send her piece to me to use. Both texters, however, at least at times imagine their respective phones to have emotions, wants, and needs. Myra’s piece exceptionally demonstrates the emotions some texters impart onto their devices: hunger, fear, and loneliness, for example.

Such emotions that the texter may project onto her phone encourage the texter to feel needed by something, or *someone*, when the texter receives a text. It is a feedback loop of projecting emotional value and then attending to those emotional investments. I recall that when I was in middle school, I would defend my persistent IM presence at home to my mother by saying, “But what if someone *needs* me?” It was the emotional servomechanism of my early online activity. I believe a similar motivation is at least partially at work in the texter’s eagerness to stay connected. The texter initially feels needed (by both her device and her texting partners) when her phone pings or whistles or buzzes, prompting her to read the message, and it is only after realizing that the text was inconsequential that she puts it down. Or, in another case, the texter may respond, and thus feel like she has sent a favor or a gift, in a sense, to further strengthen the relationship, ostensibly with the person on the other end, but also unconsciously

with the phone itself. It is precisely by this whole system, in which the user projects emotions onto the device to which the user must be attentive, that the texter may become a servomechanism to the emotional feedback loop of the human-medium relationship.

In addition, Anne Allison, also writing about tamagotchis, referred to the interactions one has with the tamagotchi as a kind of Foucauldian “disciplinary regime in which players become disciplined into assuming the subject position of (virtual) caregiver” (Allison 2006:172). Similarly, the texter is disciplined by her texting partners as well as by her relationship with her device to be available for communication distantly and almost regardless of time. Indeed, since habitus is “transposable” according to Bourdieu, it is possible that some of the practices from tending a mobile, virtual, screen-bound pet like a tamagotchi may have carried over to the habitus of tending to interpersonal relationships via textual communications in a mobile, virtual, and screen-bound interface for some of these individuals like Myra.

Furthermore, Myra’s grief must not only be attributed to her emotional attachment to her phone, but also to her functional attachment to it. Myra’s sadness and sympathy toward her broken phone may speak to an anxiety some have referred to as “nomophobia.” Originally coined in 2008 by the UK Post Office, the term is short for “no mobile phone phobia,” and refers to the fear of being out of mobile phone contact, whether due to the battery running out, having the phone stolen or lost, being outside of one’s service network, etc. (Daily Mail Online 2008). According to a study sponsored by SecurEnvoy in Berkshire, UK, the general percentage of nomophobic cell phone owners has increased from 53% in 2008 to 66% in 2012, with 77% of cell phone owners 18-24 years old having nomophobia (SecurEnvoy 2012). I found that when a texter would lose her phone, friends and acquaintances would often express their heart-felt

condolences and hope for its recovery, almost as if her dog had run away; in a very real sense, many of these individuals who lose their prostheses consequently lose the emotional feedback on which they have come to depend for a sense of internal stability and social normalcy, and their peers feel sympathy imagining the same happening to them. The fact that nomophobia is so widely recognized in the digital sphere, as well as the fact that the anxiety has been given a name at all, strongly indicates the kind of Foucauldian disciplinary regime to which Allison refers; the anxiety stems from the inability to perform the habitus to which many of these texters have been conditioned.

4. Unintended Consequences of the Texting Habitus

Incorporation of a device to the body sometimes comes with unanticipated side-effects. The phone might be functionally transparent to the user while it is in use, but when it is put away, the user may be so accustomed to immediately reacting to a buzz or ring from her phone that she may imagine such prompts in anticipation. “Phantom Vibration Syndrome,” which also goes by the names of “ringxiety,” “fauxcellarm,” and other hilarious puns, is another recently coined term for the feeling of one’s phone ringing or vibrating when it is not. Most informants with whom I spoke mentioned feeling a phantom vibration periodically, with a range from once every few weeks to several times a day. But I was surprised to meet a sophomore who had experienced phantom vibrations despite the fact that she had owned a cell phone for only two years. Moreover, she could not tell me when she first started feeling them; although she had only owned a phone for such a comparatively short period of time, she said that she “can’t remember when it started, so it had to be soon after I got a phone” and that she still feels the phantom

vibrations “all the time, usually a few times a week.” Another informant, Cindy, is a texter who feels many phantom vibrations over the course of every day, almost always in anticipation of an incoming text or call. A few reported not remembering the last time they felt a phantom vibration, although Tylor, an electronic music major, noted that he may have become so accustomed to other vibrations through his music experiments that he no longer immediately thought of his phone when he felt one. In Tylor’s words, “It could be a car or train passing nearby, or a flying bug or something... Vibrations are everywhere.”

While nomophobia is a phenomenon in which the phone only passively plays a role, phones may also actively malfunction, causing the user to feel not just sympathy for the phone (as in the case of Myra), but also an empathetic connection with it to the extent that the owner might feel as if the phone’s functional state reflects the owner’s internal functional state:

Dan: How do you feel when a piece of technology is taking longer to perform than you thought it would?

Tylor: Depends on the function, but it can be pretty frustrating, especially when a program is simply not responding to input/crashes. You remember my old android phone and how it did crazy things without me touching it? Kinda made me feel like something internal to me was malfunctioning. I'm used to internet being laggy because 3G and wireless is so spotty these days, but when it stops responding altogether it can be a bit nerve-wracking

Tylor’s servomechanical relationship with his old phone often felt more like a contentious relationship than a partnership. This particular story begins during the spring of 2012 around the time of an LSD trip, when the glitchiness of Tylor’s phone reached a peak during his trip. He told me that on the day of the trip, his device, an older android phone with a keyboard, would autonomously search random strings of letters which would return the familiar message “No results found for uiyhw kdpnz” from Google. The phone would also tend to open the app Google Maps on its own and fly around the map as if a finger was controlling the direction. On

any app that would allow it, the phone would moreover resize and drag the window around the screen in random ways, as if two individuals were fighting over the interface. At the end of his trip, Tylor told me that it felt as if his phone was *tripping with him*; he and I later joked about the phantom searches and erratic map behavior, saying that it was as if his phone was wondering the questions in Tylor's head: "what do I know? what *can* I know? where am I?" Tylor also told me that he had brought his glitchy phone to the attention of another tripping partner that afternoon, presenting it like it was a child's mind in the body of a smart phone erratically exploring its environment and its own self. Tylor reported that the tripping partner, a 21-year old woman with an affinity for children, responded delightedly by saying that she had never thought of a piece of technology in such a manner, and that he had given her a completely new way of viewing her devices.

For our purposes, Tylor's story ends in New York City the following summer, no longer tripping but still using his glitchy phone, trying to meet with his friends. In the middle of using the maps app, his phone shut off without forewarning and refused to be resuscitated. He was forced to use a pay phone, which he described as "surreal," and had to call a mutual friend for the phone number of the friend he was trying to meet since, naturally, the rest of his contacts were stored solely on his phone. But he also recounted that while using the pay phone, he thought to himself "I guess there's still a purpose for these things."

5. A Brief Portrait of the Texter

So what does the texter's social body look like at Bard? The texter may come from any walk of life. One can recognize the texter, however, by the way in which she uses her phone.

When texting, she tends to hunch over a little, positioning her body inward toward the device in her hand(s), as opposed to the generally more open presentation of the body one practices when engaged in more immediately present social activities. Her eyes are focused on the screen, and therefore she may need a second to adjust her eyes from the phone-as-visual-barrier if she is to look up from the device before she is done with it. If she is a frequent texter, she is probably quite dextrous with her thumbs, as evidenced by the speed by which she taps on her phone. She might occasionally look up from her device to stretch her hunched back, balancing her phone on her lap in a manner simultaneously seeming haphazard and controlled. She is also usually silent when engaged in the activity of texting, occasionally laughing out loud at something particularly funny on her phone, but often holding in such bursts of laughter or smiling/laughing silently. She may tap the shoulder of her friend to show him a funny or shocking message, and indeed will tend to show rather than read aloud the message, perhaps due to the texting habitus designating the practice as a generally unspoken activity. The texter's face is often rather difficult to read when she herself is reading or composing a text message, as she usually has no reason to make any facial expressions since her texting partner cannot see her reaction. She may also seem very focused on her screen, unless she is having difficulty composing her own message, in which case she may direct her gaze aimlessly elsewhere, perhaps in an effort to briefly escape the feedback of the word-mirror staring back at her from the screen.

Where and when does the Bard texter text? Waiting for the campus shuttle at the stop. In the shuttle. Walking to class. Sitting in the classroom, waiting for it to begin. Outside but close to the dorm building, smoking a cigarette. In the dining hall, while her friends discuss a topic in which she has no interest or investment. At an on-campus music venue while the band is

playing, or for those who really care about the music, between songs or between bands, texting her friends about their whereabouts. In the elevator. On the toilet. At a house party, trying to find her friends or flirting with a crush. In her bed, before going to sleep, or, in the case of my informant Paul, in bed *while sleeping*. Thus, the texting habitus has been so well-incorporated into the lives of many students at Bard that there is no environment in which it is out of place.

Chapter II Texting as a New Talk

1. The Third Medium

Eric Havelock, in his book *Preface to Plato*, claims that Plato benefited immensely from the transition from a primarily oral tradition of pre-Socratic Greek thought to a more analytical thinking style caused by greater literacy in Plato's time. Plato himself formulates the two media of speech and writing, if not as binary opposites, then certainly in tension. Writing, Plato makes Socrates claim, is inert, lifeless, and more appropriate for play. Speech, on the other hand, is dynamic, living, and more appropriate for serious matters. Plato himself, however, unlike his mentor Socrates, was quite prolific textually and pushed the newly popularizing medium of writing to possibilities before unheard of; namely, the move from the rigid cadence and strict musical structure of traditional oral poetry that had been written down to the more colloquial and structurally loose style of Plato's writing. Havelock argues that the extended powers of writing, originally conceived of as a secondary medium to the primary medium of speech, reshaped not just Plato, but the whole of classical Greek culture.

Drawing heavily from Havelock, Walter Ong makes the claim that the members of literate and illiterate cultures (or what he calls "primary oral cultures") think differently on a fundamental level:

Without writing, the literate mind would not and could not think as it does, not only when engaged in writing but normally even when it is composing its thoughts in oral form. More than any other single invention, writing has transformed human consciousness. (Ong 1982:78)

The above quotation comes from Ong's book *Orality and Literacy*, which suggests a binary distinction even in the title. For Ong, one is either "untouched by writing" or one is not, and

those of the latter group are irreversibly altered with respect to the psyche (Ong 1982:9). Thus, from Plato to Havelock to Ong, it appears that the spoken word and the written/printed word have stood as two fundamentally opposite poles of language-made-manifest for well over two millennia.

Texting as a medium, however, is more than just the sum of its parts originating from speech and writing/print. Although the same could be said about other computer mediated communication (CMC) such as instant messaging, the medium of texting more so than any other CMC complicates this long-held dichotomy because it blends the unique spatial and temporal characteristics that belong to speech and writing/print to generate not just a wholly new medium, *but also a new set of practices and expectations with implications beyond the use of the medium itself*; a new habitus, not unlike the transformative effects of writing on the primary oral culture of pre-platonic Greece. Rich Ling has described the texting medium as a “translinguistic drag queen, since it has features of both spoken and written culture but with enough flare of its own to catch your attention” (Ling 2004:162). It is this idiosyncratic mixture of writing/print and speech which produces new practices and expectations that I seek to disentangle by examining the common qualities between texting and the other two traditional media. I believe that understanding the formal properties of both the spoken word and the written/printed word will illuminate the questions around meaning and experience in the different forms of human language-expression I am examining.

Although the texting medium may resemble print far more closely in form, it functions more like speech: it is fast, it is heavily colloquial (and often formulaic), and it expects a response. All of these qualities allow for “talk” to occur by the texted word, albeit of a slightly

different kind compared to talk produced by the spoken word. For the moment, I will primarily describe “traditional” (*i.e.* spoken) talk. Following Erving Goffman, I define “talk” as follows:

It is an example of that arrangement by which individuals come together and sustain matters having a ratified, joint, current, and running claim upon attention, a claim which lodges them together in some sort of intersubjective, mental world” (Goffman 1981:70-71).

He contrasts “talk” with other “social situations” such as games and “striking” events (71), as well as client-server “service transactions” such as a customer-cashier relationship, or a patient-doctor relationship (141-142). The difference is that “talk” concerns “a common subject matter” that generally seems to be more abstracted from immediately perceivable matters than physical goods being exchanged or short fragmented descriptions about the state of one’s body (140). Thus, “talk” requires a specific kind of attention that often rejects the material environment as integral to the activity, and instead draws upon mutually sustained and abstracted concepts that are manifested solely by the media used; in the case of talk via speech, that would be the body language, the eye-contact, in addition to the words exchanged and the mutual understanding of those words on the part of the participants. Moreover, both Ong and Goffman agree that all talk “demands anticipated feedback”: that the recipient of my “utterance” will respond with an “utterance” of her own that fits both the range of appropriate responses that I expect from her and as well as the range of time in which I expect her to respond (Ong 1982:176). This anticipated feedback, which determines the rhythm of “utterances” and actions for a participant within a conversation, is a set of expectations that the participants of the same conversation may or may not share.

Given these characteristics of talk in speech, I argue that certain ways of texting can also be a form of talk with important similarities to talk via speech, but also with traits shared with

print, as well as characteristics uniquely its own. The texting medium can be a kind of talk that, unlike speech-conversations, is (primarily) textual, asynchronous, and conflates multiple timeframes over the duration of the text-conversation. Although Goffman used the term “talk” exclusively to describe verbal events, his own definition only implicitly concerns the spoken word. Colloquially, the word “talk” often replaces “text” (as a verb), but this synaesthetic conflation is almost never pointed out by those who hear or implement that usage. The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives exactly one definition of “talk” in the verb form that mentions writing, and although the first cited usage of the word “talk” in this way comes from 1705, there is only one such citation (“talk, v.” *OED*). Furthermore, in the noun form of “talk,” there is again just one definition involving writing, and--although this usage appears 150 years before the verb form in relation to writing--it is intrinsically connected to words with origins in speech: “[a]ppplied to writing of the nature of familiar or loose speech” (“talk, n.”). It seems that this form of “talk” refers to colloquially spoken words which are then written or printed, and this definition may even refer to the concept of “rumor” which the word “talk” sometimes carries (e.g. “talk of the town”). The significance here is that “talk” traditionally only appears in writing in the “familiar” tone, which is seemingly understood to be distinct from the formal voice of the author-writer. Likewise, I will argue in later that the tone of texting is also primarily familiar and that formal talk is generally thought to be inappropriate for the “playful” medium.

2. Discrete and Fluid

Before I dive too deeply into the similarities and differences between talk via texting and talk via speech, I must briefly outline the relationship between texting and print. In form, the

printed word and the texted word are superficially very similar. The greatest difference in form is that the printed word is made manifest by ink and paper, and the digital word is made manifest most commonly today by electricity, bits, and liquid crystal. In the case of English at least, both the texted word and the written/printed word are also alphabetic, allowing them to visually abstract sonic events “directly to spatial equivalents, and in smaller, more analytic, more manageable units than a syllabary” (Ong 1982:91). In the case of print, as in digital text, the letters are discrete, exactly spaced, and uniform in appearance, abstracting the alphabetic letters further into an exact and even spatial layout. By “discrete,” I mean “[s]eparate, detached from others, individually distinct” (“discrete, adj. and n.” *OED*) which necessarily implies the existence of boundaries or limits for its separation. It is to this bounded quality of the “discrete” object that I now turn. Each letter occupies a predetermined allotted amount of space, as it were, and each letter of the same kind occupies the same amount of space. Each letter is bounded by the space it has been allotted, and the invisible boundary of each letter-space is shared with the next letter-space (or actual space, punctuation mark, etc.). This discrete nature of both printed and digital letters makes the visual form of the letters staccato, compared to letters in writing (cursive) in which each letter visually flows continuously from one to the next, and letters in speech which run with such invisible fluidity that they can only be identified retroactively, even despite stutters and other possible vocal interruptions.

In a similar way, each individual text message is confined within a box of some sort in every mobile phone, which often includes the name or phone number of the person who sent the message. From the perspective of the user, the message never leaves its box unless it is deleted from the device on which the message appeared. It is possible to copy the message contents and

forward them to another recipient, but the copy is just that—a copy—and the original message remains where it was. In a way, the digital text is more bounded than the printed word, and exceedingly more so than the written word. One can write on any surface on which the writing implement can bond. The same can be said of print, except print is usually consistently spaced and each letter discretely separated, and thus usually appears more uniform than writing. Digital text, however, can only appear on a screen (or projector), and can only appear on the section of the screen that allows such input from the human-user. One cannot just open any program on a computer or app on a phone, start typing, and expect the text to appear. The keys must be entered into a specific area, usually a box of some sort or another bounded area, in a specific program or app.

Not only are the letters discrete, but whole printed (and many written) texts are also composed with clear beginnings and ends. This is usually the case when the author intends for the text to be read by others. The boundaries of the written/printed text of this kind are delineated by a myriad of markers: to provide some examples, the front and back cover of a book; the declaration of the recipient at the top of a letter and the name of the sender at the bottom; the indent at the beginning of a paragraph and its final hanging line; or even the capitalization of the first letter of a sentence and its ultimate punctuation¹ mark to literally “point out” the end of the sentence. The printed message intended for social transmission is composed of many discrete parts that encapsulate smaller discrete parts, down to the letter, and the whole text itself is a completed composition bounded by a beginning and end. The contents of a letter or book may reference previous letters or books, but the text in itself is discrete and complete.

¹ Punctuation: “classical Latin *punctus* action of pointing” (OED)

Even conversations in speech are bounded by beginnings and ends, since speech is an event in time (Ong 1982:31-32). Goffman alludes that for spoken talk to occur, the participants must be engaged in a common event or *timeframe* (Goffman 1981:70-71). The timeframe is usually bracketed by mutual opening and closing rituals which often come in the form of simple salutations (e.g. “hello” and “good-bye”).

The asynchronous quality of the texting medium, however, resists such a simple demarcation of a common timeframe. Furthermore, unlike the letter or book or even spoken conversation, the boundaries of text messages in terms of beginnings and ends are not so clear. In reference to speech, Goffman calls this phenomenon an “open state of talk,” a talk condition in which:

participants [have] the right but not the obligation to initiate a little flurry of talk, then relapse back into silence, all this with no apparent ritual marking, as though adding but another interchange to a chronic conversation in progress. (Goffman 1981:134-135)

If a text conversation has already been established, each new text message is actually another addition to a macro “chronic conversation in progress” and each “little flurry of talk” is an individual texting encounter. Due to the on-going, frequently updating quality of text messages, however, all text conversations are open states of talk with no foreseeable end. At least with the spoken open state of talk, one knows that once one leaves the office at the end of the day, for example, the state of talk has closed and will be reset in the morning. Therefore, I suggest a revision to Goffman’s term to be used in reference to texting: a *perpetual state of talk* or a *perpetual conversation*.

It has become more-or-less standard for cell phones to categorize text messages by sets of perpetual conversations, resulting in all text messages between the same participants

encompassed together in one linear series of messages which the user can scroll through vertically, even though they might be on different topics or be a series of separate discussions. Therefore, one may see the contents of any perpetual conversation up to the present moment. Viewed in this linear layout, one could find the beginning of a *perpetual conversation* by scrolling to the first text message in the series, but this “beginning” would only be the message that initiated texting contact between the parties for the very first time. Therefore, unless the present conversation also happens to be the first texting conversation between the parties, that first text message would not be the beginning of the conversational topic at hand. In addition, one could even more easily find the “end” of a perpetual conversation by opening the latest message in the series. But neither is this “end” always interpreted as the end of the conversation at hand, especially since concluding salutations like “good bye” that normally bracket the end of spoken social encounters are often absent from text messaging; rather, the last message in every *perpetual state of talk* has the potential to be replaced by the beginning of a new conversational topic at any time. Significantly, most phones do not indicate the beginning of one “little flurry of talk” and the end of another within the perpetual state of talk, and even the ones that do make such divisions by time and not topic.

Moreover, although each message is bound by its respective box, and indeed contemporary texters often send messages much longer than the former 160-character limit, it is not uncommon for one participant to send two or more separate text messages in succession to complete a thought. To use Erving Goffman’s term, the message(s) that one participant sends before another participant responds is a “turn,” that is: ““a stretch of talk, by one person, before and after which there is silence on the part of the person”” (Goffman 1981:23). With the texting

medium, it is difficult to determine what exactly constitutes a “silence,” but if we interpret the participant’s decision to stop sending texts and wait for a response as a “silence,” then a single participant may send many uninterrupted messages as one turn before a second participant responds with his own turn.² Although these messages are visually divided by their respective text boxes, the use of multiple uninterrupted messages in texting can often (but not always) indicate a continuous thought-process, even if the participant corrects or contradicts herself in individual subsequent messages. The same can even be said in some cases when a person *is* interrupted by a text from her partner while she is in mid-composition, in which case she may send the message anyway which should have directly followed her own previous sent message to complete her turn. Thus, individual text messages sent in succession from the same person may overcome the visual boundaries of their respective text boxes to express a continuous, fluid, and unbounded “*turn*.”

3. Asynchronous Transmission and Flickering Permanence

Another quality shared between the digital word and the written/printed word is their relative permanence as transmitters of information compared to the spoken word, the only conditions of this asynchronous transmission being that the physical word and the knowledge of its code survive the passing of time. The written or printed word is intended to last, if not permanently, then at least longer than the ephemeral spoken word. Because of this intrinsic quality of the written/printed word, the recipient of a message in this medium is almost always removed from the author-writer by a noticeable amount of time; the time separating the writer

² The usage of the term “turn” to refer to individual messages in CMCs and not, in my sense, a sum of messages that make up a conversational turn, has also been used (Tagliamonte 2008:7).

from the reader could be minutes or weeks or thousands of years, or anywhere in between.

Indeed, it is often the case that upon the author-writer's death only her static spectral words will remain of her ability to express herself. Those words, usually combined into a comprehensive text like a book, become the locus of her presence after her life has passed.

Furthermore, the permanence of the written/printed word causes the word to separate itself from the time of its production the longer it endures. Thus, the years in which an ancient text was composed are usually quite debatable; medieval texts were often not dated at all; and modern books only come with the year they were published. The month or week or day, or even hour and second do not matter, for books are meant to "speak" to readers indefinitely. The modern magazine and newspaper *do* include the month and day, as well as the year, but the reason for this is because they are not meant to be comprehensive texts. Rather, these periodicals are meant to update readers on current happenings; and indeed, the claims in the last issue are subject to revision in the next issue. And yet, even these printed works regarding current affairs are kept and catalogued, in libraries for example, and are meant to last for the sake of historical relevance.

The digital word is subjected to a similar asynchronous phenomenon of separation from its original time of production, although usually on a shorter scale due to its relative fragility compared to the written/printed word. In the words of Rich Ling, "Sending a message does not assume that you are coming into direct contact with the receiver; rather, it is often the case that you are simply 'posting' a message for later scrutiny" (Ling 2004:150). Informants of mine have spoken of old text messages (of varying "age") that they have received, intentionally saved, and occasionally revisited not necessarily as messages from the past, but as if they are sentiments

continuously expressed. The reason for the digital word's fragility and shorter scale of permanence, to quote N. Katherine Hayles, is because of "[t]he immateriality of the text" which comes from "the informational structure that emerges from the interplay between pattern and randomness" that makes the existence of the words "flicker" (Hayles 1999:30). The "randomness" inherent in digital text is that set of variables of which if one or more changes, the whole of the text can change. The example Hayles provides is that of changing the font of a digital text with a single command, which is only possible because the informational structures that manifest the text rely both on the consistency of a pattern as well as the variables intrinsically tied to the pattern that allow for the text's easy alterations (31). This concept of a "flickering" instability caused by "the interplay between pattern and randomness" can also be exported to other characteristics of texting, as I will argue here and in the next chapter.

Thus, text messages have a *flickering permanence*. A consequence of this immateriality and easy transformability of the digital word is that the word's very existence becomes unstable. The fact that whole digital texts, folders of texts, or even the entire contents of a hard drive can be deleted with a few accidental taps or clicks is a testament to the medium's fragility. I was actually with my girlfriend, a fairly savvy texter herself, when she accidentally deleted the entirety of our perpetual conversation from her phone: the look of regret and horror at her mistake that she gave me remains vivid in my memory. I, myself, have experienced the strange feeling of starting over from scratch after replacing an old phone, as if I had lost and had to rebuild the relationships I had made over text. And many other informants of mine have also recounted getting a new phone (or another phone of the same model), and feeling a longing for the perpetual conversations collected over months or even years saved on the old phone.

Still, the digital word's flickering permanence is more enduring compared to the ephemeral and instant-bound spoken word, and because of this, the text message may also serve as the textual presence of the absent texted talk participant, just as the book does for the deceased author-writer. Unlike with the book, however, but more closely related to periodicals, one updates one's textual presence with each new text message sent so that each message is an impermanent presence meant to be replaced eventually by a "more present" or co-temporal message. Because of the medium's ability to act as a frequently updated word-presence of the texted talk participant, I can carry a friend's textual presence wherever I bring my texting device. Like the photo in one's wallet that was more common in days past, the presence is incomplete and surely emotionally incomparable to an actual, corporeal, immediate presence. Unlike the photo, however, I can contact the actual individual through my own textual presence in the texting medium, and then receive a response back--a remarkable thing if one considers that in reality, I and many other texters carry not one but several frequently updated textual presences almost everywhere we go. Because of the flickering characteristic of both the digital text medium and the manner in which talk via text is conducted, however, these presences are constantly shifting, incomplete, in-progress, becoming as opposed to being, unlike the iconic photograph which year after year signifies a fixed image even as the signified person ages and changes in appearance. Yet, still more lasting than speech, text messages endure the passing of time until they are deleted, lost (in the case of a new phone), or replaced (as a textual presence).

4. Ambiguity, Play, and “Linguistic Ruin”

For the most part, texters do not maintain intimate relationships with formal salutations or by adhering to courtly rules appropriate for a foreign ambassador; they maintain them by familiarity and the almost ritualistic breaking of certain rules (thereby creating new rules unique to the relationship). Texting, because of its typical brevity both in terms of content and timeframe, takes the breaking of rules to a level that speech would have a more difficult time achieving. The performance of this familiarity can, and often does, draw upon preexisting societal tropes of informality: in the case of texting, emoticons/emojis and certain abbreviations may come to mind. These two forms in particular have specifically been targeted as potential signs of “linguistic ruin” by some in the past (Axtman 2002), having achieved notoriety originally in the IM medium and then migrating to texting. Many linguists more knowledgeable than I have already made compelling arguments that these unorthodox linguistic forms are not irreparable corruptions of language, but rather that they are creative additions to an already vast repertoire of linguistic styles. Sali Tagliamonte and Derek Denis argue that many users “pick and choose from all the available variants that their linguistic system has to offer,” possibly heralding “an expansive new linguistic renaissance” (Tagliamonte and Denis 2008:27). And yet this specific phrase “linguistic ruin” seems rather poignant but beautiful to me. Text messages do often contain omitted letters in words, or whole phrases reduced to initials, that is almost reminiscent of bricks crumbling from a wall. Although this practice is not as common as the popular media has led some people to believe (4), the presence of it in many texts I have witnessed indicates an informal linguistic system that is commonly legible, even when it is done on accident. Some texters even find it fun to decipher a particularly uncommon abbreviation or

to discover what a strange typo could mean. Indeed, I witnessed first-hand Paul start to delete (character by character) a typo in a text to one of his best friends, stop after deleting just a couple characters, and then retype the rest of the message with the typo still present because (as he explained to me), “I feel like she’ll appreciate it more if it’s all fucked up.” The informality of his typo is allowed and even appreciated by his friend due to the intimacy of their relationship with each other and with the medium.

Even the *systems* of abbreviations and emoticon pictographs are informal. There exists a handful that are almost universally understood (*e.g.* lol, brb, idk = “laugh out loud,” “be right back,” and “I don’t know,” respectively). Then there are others that are quite common and widespread, but occasionally may require an explanation (*e.g.* omw = “on my way”; brt = “be right there”). And then there are others that one particularly punny individual may invent and then spread to her social circles. At this college where many students take pride in their wit and skill with wordplay, these invented abbreviations are particularly common. One informant, Sheila often uses “tomo” as a shortening for “tomorrow,” rejecting the more common “tmrw” that others are more likely to text to her. Tylor sometimes abbreviates “between” to “btw,” which is also a common initialism for “by the way.” I have often heard students refer to the library as the “libs” (pronounced either with a long or short *i*), or the shuttle as the “shutts,” both in speech and in texts.

As for emoticons, although the colon-closed parenthesis (*i.e.* :)) or colon-hyphen-closed parenthesis (*i.e.* :-)) has become somewhat of a standard, some individuals prefer the equal sign-colon (*i.e.* =)) or the equal sign-closed bracket (*i.e.* =]) to indicate a friendly smile. Left-to-right is also somewhat of a standard, but some prefer the orientation to be right-to-left; indeed, some

emoticons require a right-to-left orientation, such as the open-mouthed frown (*i.e.* **D-:**).

Moreover, the same emoticon may have different meanings according to the context, the most notorious of which would be the “winky face” as I have most commonly heard it (*i.e.* ;-)); it might indicate an inside joke, a secret, a sexual innuendo, and a myriad other meanings, quite closely mirroring the various uses of the wink in face-to-face contexts. In this way, although there is a loose standard of emoticons, enough individuals are so literate in this pictorial “language” of emoticons that it has purely become a matter of preference how one wishes to iconically represent one’s emotional state, as long as the representation has an *iconic* resemblance to whatever emotion is being represented.

Moreover, smart phones and iPhones in particular allow the sending of “emojis,” the more or less standardized system of pictographic signs that started in Japan but has since become popular in the United States. These signs are primarily composed of icons, many of which are cartoonish faces expressing some emotion or disposition like in the Western emoticon system, but emojis also include icons for different ages and genders, hand gestures, hetero- and homosexual couples, clothing, animals, plants, meteorological activity, food, buildings, vehicles, devices, etc. Some of the emoji signs are symbols, such as Western astrology symbols, the recycling symbol, various traffic signs, arrows pointed in every direction, etc. The primary reasons for why my informants use emojis are because it is playful, fun, and creative. The initial novelty of images displayed in a primarily text-based medium is certainly part of the fun, as it may seem almost subversive to bare text. Like with emoticons, texters may represent their emotional states with graphical depictions; but unlike emoticons, these images are discrete and more resemble cartoons. Thus, the sender of an emoji might find it fun to depict herself as a

the right immediately followed by the “a-okay” hand gesture (*i.e.* 🍷👉), which the recipient instantly understood as a request for sex by her then-sexual partner who had sent the message; not the most subtle message, but one that apparently got the point across in a humorous way, as evidenced by the recipient breaking into laughter every time she looked at it on the day she received it.

There is no “correct” way of using emojis. Replacing words with emojis is taken to a whole new level with the narrative story-telling style, which often has no text at all. And the “secret code” style of using emojis is the opposite of the literal interpretive style of word-replacing. The linear string of emojis can also be replaced with a more abstract larger picture composed of emojis instead. An example from some emoji pictures I have received is a face shape composed of two bombs for eyes (to symbolize a headache), a pill for a nose in the next line (as the cure for the headache) and a line of cigarettes as a mouth in the third line (to represent the cigarettes that will keep the headache away). Others may simply pepper emojis into the primarily textual message, similarly to how emoticons are traditionally used but with a much broader range and ease of literacy. But regardless of what the emoji message looks like, and despite the standardization of the emoji signs across platforms, there is no standard way of *using* emojis; in my observation, the only commonality of how texters *use* emojis is that they primarily send them to more intimate texting partners in a very informal manner, assuming that the recipients will understand the sometimes multi-layered meanings without explanation.

5. Instrumental Texting vs. Chatting

When I asked my informants for their expected timeframe for a recipient to respond to a text, answers varied anywhere between “immediately” to “eventually.” A few claimed that by default they expected their messages to be read as soon as they were received and expressed frustration when their phones would let them know that the recipient had read a message but had not responded yet. Others would become frustrated when their friends would not respond at all or respond far past the expected timeframe, but this annoyance often had to do with the senders knowing that the recipients frequently checked their phones, thus making the senders feel like they are being ignored by their friends. When I asked my informant Stacy, she replied that it depends, but she added, “I’ve noticed that with friends with benefits, texts are answered much faster after midnight than before midnight.” Another informant, Zack, replied that he had “no expectations” with regards to texting, and that he would text several individuals and just “let it go,” revealing the informality of the medium to him, both in terms of how he uses it and how he expects others to use it.

In my observation, students at Bard primarily use the texting medium in two ways: instrumental texting and chatting. Borrowed from Rich Ling, who worked on teenaged cell phone owners in Norway circa 2003, “instrumental” texting is the use of texting for a specific end. Instrumental texts tend to be informal and relatively brief, anticipating a relatively prompt response in a similarly brief form. Ling identified three major categories for texting usage: coordination/planning, information collecting, and entertainment (Ling 2004:155). The first two are instrumental uses of the medium; they are for specific purposes using texting as the instrumental means. When I asked my own informants how they use texting, the most common

responses I received by far were for making plans, coordinating, or asking questions, corresponding with Ling's first two major categories.

Originally, the 160 character limit of SMS forced texters to shorten their messages and use abbreviations (many of which were carried over from the IM medium). Furthermore, the spread of texting in the United States followed the *American Idol* hysteria, which encouraged would-be texters to submit their votes via text (Jenkins 2006:59). As this was the first usage of texting for many Americans, perhaps the manner in which it was introduced initially instilled in some Americans a concise and instrumental attitude toward the new medium. In my observation, the primary reason for texting is for coordination, which may indicate that many individuals use the medium as a way to plan co-present, and thus more immediate interactions. But it may also indicate that texters not only use the medium instrumentally, but by extension, "use" distant texting partners instrumentally as well: to answer a question, for instance. I observed both behaviors over the course of my research. Each kind of instrumental text was concise, composed under the assumption that extraneous details were a waste of time and under the anticipation of a similarly brief response. Therefore, these kinds of texts are functionally more discrete since they merely expect a quick and simple answer.

Chatting—in the sense of short colloquial, informal conversations, but also in the sense carried over from the IM medium—is the other way in which texters talk via text. Although nearly all informants with whom I spoke pointed to instrumental texting as the primary purpose for the medium, many informants also admitted to chatting via text from time to time. For many texters with whom I spoke, chatty texts have a broad range in terms of length. They can be long expositions about the texter's day, almost like a letter or a diary entry, or they can be quite

concise witty or silly thoughts that the texter wishes to share. Chat-texts are also far more likely to use emojis, emoticons, linguistic quirks, and inside jokes than instrumental texts, as such messages generally take longer to compose and demand a deeper engagement with the medium.

Many individuals who identified as “conversational” texters said that they had at least one “conversation” with each of their conversational texting partners per day, with about ten volleys of messages back and forth per conversation, although some would send an amount many times that range. It is then no surprise that nearly all of my informants who claimed to send conversational texts regularly were highly proficient with their devices, whether using a smart phone or a basic phone. Not only does this kind of text message vary widely in terms of length, but the timeframe of an expected response in a chat conversation also varies, ranging from the near-instantaneity more common to an instrumental text, to many hours or even days. One informant in particular, Cindy, described having four or five friends (most of whom she had met on the internet years ago), with whom she “keeps up” daily over text. Usually, however, Facebook (including Facebook IM) or email, if not calls, are the primary means of contact, with text messages as a supplement. She usually sends at least 5-10 texts per distant friend throughout each day, oftentimes well exceeding that range. Others reported having similar texting relationships, but with friends who live across Bard campus or in one of the neighboring town. Only a few of my informants, however, identified themselves as chatting more than five individuals regularly, perhaps indicating that most of my informants have not yet fully adapted to the new talk. Or perhaps these texters who do not frequently chat via text simply prefer to keep the immediately social and distantly social worlds separated.

Chapter III

Presence and Attention

1. Attention Channels

My friend Vivian has a pet peeve. If she is with her friends, during a meal or an evening hang-out for example, and one of her friends takes out a laptop for entertainment instead of socializing with her and the other friends, she will let that person know that such behavior is rude. She is not a luddite: she has an old iPhone, an older MacBook; she keeps up a modest but regular and entertaining Facebook presence; she texts and Snapchats and takes pictures and videos with her phone as much as the next stereotypical 21 year-old American-born liberal arts college student. She is not even particularly chatty, often preferring to keep her thoughts to herself when around people she does not know well. But what irks her so much about this practice of pulling out a computer for the sake of entertainment is that, from her perspective, it creates a barrier both physically and attentively between the user and the rest of the group. To pull out a laptop, for Vivian, is almost equivalent to saying, “None of you are interesting enough to keep my attention.” In fact, I have heard her say on multiple occasions that she would rather have the offending friend sit at a separate table, completely absent from the social table, than have the friend physically present but ignoring the friends immediately around her.

Remarkably, I have never witnessed Vivian respond with such irritation to a friend using a cell phone at dinner. Sometimes, she will group phones and books with laptops as offensive materials at the dinner table. After discussing the matter with some mutual friends, however, it seems that the reason why she does not address phone use as she does laptops is because phones are more subtle, both in their use and in their physical bulk; with a phone, it is easier to flit between the immediate conversation at the table and whatever digital issue is at hand than it is

with a laptop. Furthermore, computer use is generally more sustained, whereas phone use is generally more transient across one's attention; phone use is often quick (or seemingly so) and apologetic. Even the differences in body language of the user between the two devices are telling: with the laptop, one's eyes are directed on a screen directly in front of the face, almost level with everyone else's gaze but focused on content closer in one's visual perspective. This almost-level gaze draws even more attention to the offender since from an observer's peripheral vision, the offender's eyes look as if she might engage with her co-present company, but upon gazing at her, it is clear that she is preoccupied; it is a glaring rejection of everyone else. With the phone, however, one usually tilts the head down with eyes lowered in what could be considered in other contexts a humble or submissive bodily position, perhaps unintentionally and implicitly projecting an apologetic stance.

Vivian's pet peeve demonstrates the relationship between attention and presence, as well as the contradictory expectations between different media and the problems that arise from it all that may perhaps be unique to this cultural moment. Her irritation regarding laptop use in a social space, as well as her implicit admittance of phone use in the same contexts, is not uncommon but neither is it by any means universal. The texter lives in a world in which presence is no longer determined by physical proximity, but *by the direction of one's attention*. I make no claims as to when this transition occurred; the subject could be a whole book on its own. I do claim, however, that there is now more content tailored to the texter's interests and at the tips of her fingers than ever before; and thus, there are now more agents vying for her attention, more often, more relevantly, and more persistently. Thus, the texter must manage a multiplicity of forces constantly seeking to redirect her attention and remove her from that which

is most present to her, not the least of which are the many perpetual states of talk in which she is involved. In such an environment, it seems that one must either frequently flip through hundreds of channels (with nothing good ever on), or tune out most of the content (and thus risk missing out on something important). It's either the whole satellite package or just the local stations. This is part of the environment in which many of my participants grew up, and, as a product of such an environment myself, these are some of the terms I will use.

First, the *attention channel*, which I will usually shorten to *channel*. It is my term for that contextual framework with unique content to which one may ignore or direct one's attention. One directs one's attention onto a channel. The existence of attention channels is completely subjective and phenomenological; in other words, for a channel to exist at all, an individual must direct her attention onto some content received through her sensorium and seek to make meaning consistent with her internal contextual framework superimposed onto it. The content that flows through a channel may be called a *stream*, and the mechanism by which one consumes such content is one's attention. Anything from the visual stimuli of a snail crawling along a rock to the auditory stimuli of a recorded speech can be streams for an attention channel. Furthermore, any attention channel is just one of an infinite number of possible attention channels. Indeed, in the new habitus, many texters and other individuals rapidly flicker their attentions in and out of several concurrently running channels in a short amount of time, blurring the line between presence and absence. One may even project an attention channel onto a person or an extension of a person without the person's awareness or reciprocation. My focus in this chapter, however, will be on channels mutually shared between individuals: when an attention channel is reciprocated by two or more individuals projecting their respective attention channels on each

other, they produce a dynamic, shared *mutual attention channel*. The mutual channel is composed of a combination of the content exchanged between the attentive partners, the relationship between the partners, the anticipated feedback within a perpetual state of talk, how these exchanges occur, etc. It is a complex play of perspectives, but one I will explain in more detail in this chapter.

2. Observing Signs of Presence

In the new habitus, that which is in my primary attention channel is that which is most present to me. Presence is a phenomenological event externally observed: in terms of interpersonal presence, it is the feeling of another person in one's own subjectively present here-and-now. One does not feel one's own presence directly. Similar to the concept of "relational selves" in which one determines one's own identity exclusively by one's social relationships, one only forms an approximation of one's own presence by the feedback received from other individuals, on one's physical environment, or through a reflective medium. My broad usage of the word *presence* includes the traditional definition of a whole, physical, co-spatial and contemporaneous presence in the sense of two individuals sitting side-by-side or across a table from each other. I call such a presence an *immediate presence*, since the presence is unmediated by external tools. On the other hand, I also use the term *presence* to include what I call *extended* or *mediated presence*, which is presence mediated by media external to the biological body,³ often but not always extended spatially or temporally from its site of origin. To feel a presence

³ For simplicity's sake, I do not include eyeglasses or hearing aids in the category of "external media" in this discussion since, in my opinion, these relatively passive media seek to remedy a deficiency of the biological body to the state of normalcy or averageness, not to improve or extend the body's abilities to the level of the super-human.

of either kind, it must exist within one's field of awareness, but not necessarily within one's primary attention channel. For example, my primary attention channel may be a conversation I am having with a friend beside me, but I could become aware of a distant person's extended presence to my phone if my phone is spatially and attentively within my field of awareness. Likewise, I can be having that same conversation with a friend when a stranger walks by without any acknowledgment of us, nor we of him. Yet, the stranger would not necessarily be absent to us; we would probably be aware of the person by his ambient presence: his footsteps, his physical dimensions, perhaps even his scent if he came close enough. I will explore these complexities in terms of texting further on in this chapter.

There are many types of extended presence, of which only a few can be projected by some mobile phones at this time: *auditory-presence* (e.g. a person's speech over a phone call, a recorded voice message), *textual-presence* (e.g. a text message), *photo-presence* (e.g. a picture message, a photo of the person on the receiver's phone to associate with the person's phone number), and *video-presence* (e.g. an image of a person through a video-conference program like Skype or FaceTime). All extended presences require an external medium of some sort, and thus there is always a loss of quality in the conversion from whole presence to extended presence: even the most sophisticated hologram technology at this time does not allow one to feel the texture of the projected person's hair, or smell the person's body odor. Furthermore, because presence is phenomenological, although all mediated presences are extensions of the self, not all extensions of the self are presences; the actuality of extended presence depends on the medium used and the observer's relationship with the medium. It is usually the case that for a distant

presence to be felt, the medium by which the presence is extended must be rich with detail, a claim on which I will elaborate later in this chapter.

In comparison to online media such as Facebook or blogs, texting is unique because of its almost uncanny ability to carry multiple extended presences for many in my generation despite the meager amount of information conveyed. For example, one of my informants described Facebook as a “parallel life”; several more described online interactions with other individuals, even those whom they know in person, as feeling more “mediated” and as if there is “a barrier between us.” By contrast, when asked about texting, informants with all kinds of phones and social media experiences spoke of texting as feeling “unmediated” and relatively “more direct.” One informant, Paul, spoke of websites as “places I go to, like a site” but texting as “something that comes to me.” For these average and frequent texters, the presence of a distant person may or may not be felt on a website: the presence of the mediation often overshadows the extended presence of the distant partner, even considering the multimedia, multi-temporal, and multi-spatial richness of data of a person on a website such as Facebook. But texting is performed on a device much closer to the user’s body and more deeply ingrained in the user’s habitus than other devices: it is more of a prosthesis than a tool, and its seamlessness makes it transparent to the user, allowing the user to focus her attention more on the stream of the partner’s presence in the channel and less on the medium. Thus, the bodily incorporation and transparency of the medium to the self, as well as the direction of one’s attention, is usually a stronger determinant of feeling an extended presence than the amount of sensory or informational data received.

Every presence, either immediate or extended, is an extension of the self. Another way to phrase this concept can once again be found in one of Erving Goffman’s terms:

The term *face* may be defined by the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes—albeit an image that others may share...

A person tends to experience an immediate emotional response to the face which a contact with others allows him; he cathects his face; his “feelings” become attached to it... In general, a person’s attachment to a particular face, coupled with the ease with which disconfirming information can be conveyed by himself and others, provides one reason why he finds that participation in any contact with others is a commitment. (Goffman 1974:224).

Consequently, to mistreat or do wrong to a person’s presence is to mistreat or wrong the person behind the extension. Perhaps this is an obvious point to make, but it is worth noting because not all presences project the same amount of data, and due to this fact, some presences are easier to mistreat than others. Marshall McLuhan introduced the terms “hot” media, which are in “high definition” but “low in participation,” and “cool” media, which are “low in definition” but “high in participation” (McLuhan 1964:22-23): texting is a perfect example of a cool medium. But just because a medium, or in this case, someone’s extended presence through a medium, demands greater participation for its successful interpretation by the receiver does not necessarily mean that the receiver *will* give it the appropriate level of involvement. Thus, many text messages go unanswered, and many texters who heavily invest themselves into their textual-presences have their feelings hurt.

In the case of an immediate presence, McLuhan’s distinctions between hot and cool media break down. When “reality” is the medium, the quality and amount of transmitted data is of the highest degree since it comes unfiltered. With extended presences, one’s *face* is somewhat obscured by the minimal data transmitted; recipients of one’s presence have a more difficult time determining social attributes to the person behind the extension. Yet, because there is no mediation to mask oneself in the case of immediate presences, participation must also be high to

maintain *face*. Indeed, this principle carries over to other media varying in orders of abstraction. This phenomenon might explain many of my informants' preference of the text message over a phone call: I have been told by many that the relative "immediacy" of the vocal-presence holds more of a risk of "revealing too much" or of "making a fool" of oneself. It may also explain why, in my observation, video-conferencing is limited to interactions between intimate friends, significant others, and individuals for business.

On the other hand, some of my informants who do not text regularly expressed frustration with the mask of relatively cooler extended presences (such as textual- and photo-presences) because of the media's tendencies to obscure meanings. These informants prefer encountering the risk of personal defamation face-to-face, contexts in which they feel more control because of the immediate corrective measures they can make, rather than chancing the risk of other individuals misinterpreting their extended presences. They prefer to get to the point as quickly as possible, making corrections on the fly if they feel that they have not made their point clear. For these individuals, distant contemporaneous communication is not ideal, but certainly preferable to asynchronous communication; thus, I found that these informants were generally more comfortable with their vocal-presences than their textual presences.

3. Telepresence

The receiver's experience of someone else's presence (of any type) is mostly determined by the receiver's own personal attentiveness and disposition toward the medium of transmission. The presenter's experience of her own presence is also governed by these factors. For instance, the presenter in an immediate context may seem wholly present by evidence of her physical

presence and proximity, but may feel attentively elsewhere; more present in her own internal thoughts or in a text conversation with a distant partner, and thus less present from the immediate physical context. Not only that, but the presenter may not necessarily feel “present” in the place where her extended presence reaches either. By extending one’s presence over a medium, one sends a part of one’s self. But when the presenter assumes the medium of transmission to be within the same shared attention channel as the recipient, there is an expectation for a corresponding presence from the side of the recipient to show a roughly equivalent level of personal risk, and thus, personal investment. If no counter-presence is returned, one assumes that one’s presence is ignored and absent from the perspective of the recipient; therefore, feelings may be hurt. If a response does arrive, then the original presenter’s *face* may feel validated, and furthermore, she may *imagine* her presence from the perspective of the recipient, even if she does not *feel* herself present in the distant place.

The term for *feeling* present in a distant place is “telepresence,” and the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it thusly: “The use of remote control and the feedback of sensory information to produce the impression of being at another location; a sensation of being elsewhere created in this way.” I disagree with the necessity for “remote control” in the sense of physical manipulation at a distance, since even in an immediate context one does not have to necessarily manipulate one’s physical environment in order to feel present. The only conditions of telepresence as I understand and use the term are: 1) the medium must be transparent to the user, 2) the presenter’s primary attention channel must be focused on the distant context, and 3) the distant context is established for the presenter by receiving real-time sensory feedback from the distant place. Therefore, the texter who can *imagine* her own textual-presence from the

perspective of her distant communication partner does not feel telepresent; she receives no contextual feedback from her partner unless her partner explicitly fills her in on the details. And even then, there is no guarantee that her partner is being truthful of his immediate context (an issue I will return to later in this chapter).

An integral part of what differentiates telepresence from other kinds of extended presence is a quality it also shares with immediate presence: contemporaneous mutual attention channels. This mutual channel permits social validation in the form of synchronous *social feedback*. With mere sensory feedback, the presenter may receive only the ambient environmental details of the distant context. But by adding a shared attention channel to affirm one's telepresence by having one's partner respond and act (almost) as if one were physically present bridges the attentive gap between the distant places. Without social feedback, the presenter feels no risk to her *face*, and so feels far more removed from her distant presence than if she knew that other individuals could recognize her (as the unique person behind the extended presence) and respond accordingly. Although the existence of a shared attention channel between interlocutors is important for any effective communication, it is indispensable for telepresence because it grounds the presenter in a distant dynamic context of other actors.

Without synchronous social feedback, the telepresenter is lost for context because she is both temporally and spatially removed from the place to which she extends her presence. Thus, telepresence requires contemporaneity since contexts tend to shift frequently, and therefore the presenter must be fed a constant stream of contextual information to know how to appropriately present her face. Video-conferencing and phone calls, for example, are kinds of telepresence, since both are meant for real-time communication. By contrast, a recorded video-presence or

vocal-presence, even if a corresponding extended presence was returned, could not give the presenter a feeling of telepresence due to the lack of contemporaneous sensory and social feedback. For this reason, neither texting nor picture/video messages sent by mobile phones are media by which telepresence can be felt from the perspective of the presenter; not only are they such narrow channels by which information can be conveyed (of any sort, even on a recorded video), but they are also asynchronous and so resist sustained social feedback.

4. Flickering Attention, Staggered Timeframes

While media that permit telepresence encourage deep engagement, the impossibility of telepresence via texting encourages the frequent texter to involve herself widely with the medium. In other words, the texter has access to many attention channels partially because she does not have to commit her attention to one continuously sustained channel at the expense of other channels. This is not to say that the texter directs her full attention in multiple channels simultaneously, but rather that she is (to varying degrees) involved with multiple channels concurrently running in staggered timeframes. In the role of the presenter extending herself to multiple distant places, many texters have become quite skilled in the practice of rapidly switching between channels.

I find that the television industry's distinction of consumers who are "zappers" is useful for conceiving of this channel-switching activity. "Zappers," in the words of Henry Jenkins, are "people who constantly flit across the dial—watching snippets of shows rather than sitting down for a prolonged engagement" (Jenkins 2006:74). Many of the participants in my study "zap" between attention channels in a similar manner to the zappers of television channels. They often

prefer not to stay focused on one channel for too long, and they readily zap to the next one if there is even a few seconds of undesirable content. Cindy, one of my informants who actually has ADD (four days without her medication and she “cannot form complete sentences”), told me in an interview that she checks her phone “pretty constantly like whenever there's like a lull in conversation or I'm waiting for the shuttle or something it's just like my natural reaction.” Thus, Cindy habitually “zaps” her attention from the immediate environment to one of several digital channels on her smartphone.

In the previous chapter, I described digital text as having the quality of *flickering permanence* due to its immateriality and “the interplay between pattern and randomness” (Hayles 1999:30). A similar interplay between the expected and unexpected, anticipated feedback and “zapping” activity, causes the distant texting partner’s attention in the mutual channel to *flicker* as well. Moreover, it is often the case that the texter who must deal with a partner’s flickering attention is also an attention channel zapper herself. It is a part of the new habitus, unspoken but understood, in which most texters in my study are implicated; I suspect this is a primary reason why I have not heard this particular behavior widely criticized by other texters.

This practice of rapidly flickering or zapping one’s attention is encouraged by the medium’s resistance to sustained attention, but it is also promoted by the anticipation for a nearly instantaneous response. Like interlocutors engaged in spoken conversation, when contemporary users of the texting medium talk via text message, the messages are generally composed quickly, and the delivery of the messages are expected to be nearly instantaneous. Because of these factors in conjunction with the anticipated feedback of talk, both spoken-talk and texted-talk generally demand a response in the “now.” The “now” of spoken-talk and the “now” of texted-

talk, however, are quite different. The now of spoken-talk flows from each utterance to another, often only with silences between utterances as fleeting as the utterances themselves. An utterance is made, and the response may begin even before the first utterance is completed; such utterances overlap in time. The texted word can also overlap in time, like the spoken word, but because each text message is bounded and discrete in form (as opposed to its fluidity in practice) like the written/printed word, one will always appear to arrive before the other.

Even more significantly, however, the silences between “utterances” of texted-talk can last much longer than can reasonably be expected in spoken-talk. The “now” of texting is extended by several characteristics of the medium, including but not limited to: the time it takes to compose the words in one’s head by one’s fingers instead of one’s voice; the seconds (sometimes several seconds, depending on network service) between the sending and reception of a text message; and the frequent long silences (that can range anywhere from a minute to days) between texting turns that are caused by forces external to the conversation. Many of my informants have told me that although they usually expect a prompt reply from the recipient of a text, when they themselves are in the role of the recipient, they often forget to respond to messages shortly after receiving them. This is usually because a more immediate activity interrupts their engagement with the message or prevents the texter from attending to the message in the first place. Sometimes, a texter might engage in a text conversation within the *silence*, as it were, of another activity's timeframe and, as a consequence of flickering her attention from one channel to another, momentarily forget about the running conversation until she receives a response from her distant texting partner and flickers back to the shared channel.

Thus, a single conversation of only a few dozen exchanges or less can last hours or days longer, even if one is familiar with the texting rhythm of her partner.

The combination of flickering attentions and this long “now” of texting has further ramifications for the temporality of talk via text. While text messages in practice may be used fluidly (in the sense of the perpetual conversation and the multi-message turn), the texting medium is also subject to the discreteness of one's attention. Because individuals can only attend to one text conversation at a time, the timeframes of concurrently running text conversations can be said to be *staggered*. The texter does not belong to a singular linear progression of time, but rather many frames of time that are happening in her “now,” regardless of the channels in which these timeframes exist. For instance, while I am having a face-to-face conversation with Caitlyn, I can also be texting John *while Caitlyn is talking to me*, or, perhaps, after I have asked Caitlyn to “hold on,” effectively putting my conversation with her on pause. I could then go back and forth between my conversation with Caitlyn and my conversation with John, flickering between two staggered timeframes, two different channels, and thus two different modes of concentration. Writing first gave human language-expression built-in pause, rewind, and fast-forward buttons, as it were, and this illusion of time-control has come standard with many media from writing to print to digital text devices used in the present age of compulsive multitasking. Thus, when a text conversation has ended, it is usually not a permanent end but rather a “pause” in the perpetual state of talk (Turkle 161).

This illusion of time manipulation gives the texter the feeling of control over the conversation; the rhythm of the conversation is negotiable in a way that is difficult if not impossible to replicate with spoken talk. The majority of frequent or average texters with whom

I have spoken have independently expressed this feeling of control, even without me asking. Because of the saturation of perpetual conversations in the social environment of the texter, as well as this illusionary ability to pause or otherwise manipulate the timeframes of so many talks, the texter constantly belongs to a vast pluralism of running staggered timeframes at any given moment. And because this pluralism of timeframes is an essential part of the new habitus, the texter may seek to attend to so many staggered channels that she cannot engage deeply in all of them. I will examine how texting further affects the ordering of staggered temporal expectations in the next chapter.

5. Hybrid Spaces: Hidden Behind the Medium

The texting medium does not only exist in some otherworldly dimension of radio waves and binary code, nor does it merely exist on the interface of one's phone. Through the physical object of the mobile phone, the texting medium is brought into the "real world." Neither is the mobile phone just a device for distant communication; it is also a social object in the sense that it carries social significance outside of its intended function. By using a mobile phone in a public place, the texter indicates to others, whether intentionally or not (indeed, I have been told that it is often unintentional), that she is clearly already occupied by a task and that she prefers not to be interrupted. To quote Adriana de Souza e Silva:

Hybrid spaces merge the physical and the digital in a social environment created by the mobility of users connected via mobile technology devices. Cell phones are digital interfaces that make us 'inhabit' these hybrid spaces. Mobile and portable interfaces are embedded in physical space, promoting the blurring of borders between physical and digital spaces. (Souza e Silva 2006:19)

I believe Souza e Silva has written clearly enough in this excerpt to require little additional explanation, but I will provide a few example scenarios. Even if the texter removes her attention from her immediate environment and redirects it to the channel of a text conversation, she is still physically present in the place where her body exists. She can be spoken to, unmediated except through the bare human voice, by a friend who happens to walk by her. Replace the friend with a lesser known acquaintance, however, and the presence of her phone in front of her face as well as the position of her body (often bent over, head down) is often enough for most acquaintances to ignore her; or, to put it another way, to pretend that she is absent. But she is not absent in reality; the most one could say is that she is *absent-minded*. She is in a *hybrid space* that she has produced around herself, like some sort of antisocial forcefield, by using her digital device: physically present but attentively distant.

In a way, the cell phone functions as the opposite of the conch shell from *Lord of the Flies*. Whereas, in the novel, whoever held the conch shell had the exclusive right to address the rest of the boys, the bearer of the phone effectively marks herself as “checked out” of the conversation. The significance multiplies the longer the texter is engaged with her phone and not engaged with her immediate company, such that a few seconds to read an incoming message may be permitted, but to go on Facebook on one’s smartphone during a conversation may be criticized by the interlocutors. Furthermore, the significance of phone-engagement is inversely related to the number of individuals in the immediate company; in other words, “check out” of the presence of fewer individuals translates to a greater offense. In a large group of individuals, one flickering attention is far less noticeable; but in a group of three friends, the other two members of the party expect the sharing of a mutual attention channel: mutual attention given,

mutual attention received, and mutual validation and enjoyment all around. The exception to this general principle is when the texter is alone (in terms of social immediacy): then, the texter has no social obligations to any immediate company and thus there is no one to whom she is attentively distant or absent.

Perhaps one can draw an analogy between the mobile phone and the book or the notebook. By using any of these media in a public place, one “checks out” of the immediate environment and directs one’s attention to the medium; Fiona’s practice of reading a book for a few minutes while her friends use their phones may come to mind. When I brought up the issue of interrupting a person texting on a phone, one of my informants pointed out that she feels just as uncomfortable interrupting someone who is reading a book or writing in a notebook. The most striking difference that I have noticed between a phone and another analog medium such as a book is that one may feel less inclined to interrupt a person on a phone since, presumably, the person will be finished with her turn at conversation shortly. With a book, an observer has no way of knowing when the reader will decide to stop reading. Furthermore, the reason for the shorter timeframe of a texting turn is because one can assume that there is another person on the other end of the attention channel waiting for a response. Thus, a would-be interruptor might be afraid of disrupting two or more individuals from their attention channels, not just one in the case of a person reading a book.

Another difference between the cell phone and the book is that the latter is static in its content. With the basic cell phone, one’s experience with it is dynamic and mobile not just in the sense of portable, but also in that the content of one’s *present* is mobile because of the medium. Even further, through smartphones, which are more prevalent at Bard College than most other

places I have visited, hybrid spaces become more than just texting spaces; they become portals to the whole wide Internet. Souza e Silva argues that because of this fact, “It has become possible to literally 'carry' the Internet wherever we go, feeling as though we are everywhere at the same time” (Souza e Silva 2006:19). Although I and many of my smartphone-bearing informants identify with the first part of her statement, I must disagree with the second half since she is arguing that access to the Internet implies not just a feeling of telepresence, but a feeling of omni-telepresence. None of my informants ever expressed feeling such a thing, and in fact, it seems that many of them feel the opposite: that all of the Internet is at their fingertips. It is not that my informants feel everywhere; it's that they feel as if anything from anywhere can be brought “here.”

The sites of mobile social interaction may seem to be solely defined by the phones used to mediate such interactions, since the common expectation is that as long as the texter has her phone on her person, she is contactable and can contact others. The reality of the matter, however, is that these sites of mobile social interaction are hybrid spaces composed of the relationship between the device(s), the person(s) using the device, and the physical space in which the person(s) and device(s) exist. This fact becomes quite clear when one considers how common it is for one texter to ask another if the message she just composed is appropriate for the situation. It is also fairly common to see small groups of friends peering over each other to read a conversation on a single phone and give suggestions on how to respond. In these ways and more, the component parts of the hybrid space have actual effects on the mobile social interactions between distant parties.

Coupled with the impossibility of telepresence via text message, this fact allows the ability to obscure from the distant party other immediately present participants behind the appearance of a single voice. I have outlined such examples of this possibility above. In addition, however, the same possibility for multiple persons behind the medium permits distant parties, in some cases, to expect one message to reach more than one person. Thus, my girlfriend or I will receive texts implicitly addressing both of us, since our friends often expect the two of us to be co-present in the same potential hybrid space. Inversely, my girlfriend might text our friends about plans for the evening, and our friends will implicitly understand that I am also included in the discussion via my girlfriend. As an aside, when I addressed this phenomenon with my girlfriend, she felt uncomfortable, as if she were throttling my involvement with the texting medium and controlling access to my friends. I, on the other hand, disagreed and said it felt more like I was using *her* as the mediating instrument between the texting world and me, a feeling which made *me* feel uncomfortable. Perhaps this difference in perspectives demonstrates the subjectivity by which attention and presence is experienced. The words of my friends become present to me via textual-presence, via the texting medium, via my attention on my girlfriend; a long stream of presence traveling through multiple channels from my perspective, but a controlled flow of friendship imposed on me from her perspective.

Chapter IV

Social Expectations and Tensions

1. Intimate and Informal

Paul frequently flips his heavily abused keyboard phone between conversational turns or in anticipation of a call. Paul also has a distant girlfriend three hours away with whom his main channels of communication are texting, Facebook IM, phone calls, and video chat, all roughly equal in importance; Sally, his girlfriend, is usually the person for whom he waits in anticipation. Paul and Sally usually exchange many short messages to each other over the day, sometimes using each other as a living journal onto which they can express snippets of their own internal monologues, although the messages become much more extensive if one of them cannot take a call or has been away from a computer for too long. Because of the fact that two out of the four main communication media that connect Paul to Sally must go through his phone, because they are in contact throughout the whole day, and because the couple has spent the majority of the past four years maintaining their relationship in this way, Paul associates the texting medium with the intimacy of the content that passes between him and Sally through it. Thus, texting is often associated with the intimate relationships texters maintain through it.

The combination of near-instantaneity and bodily incorporation of the texting medium, along with the perceived social normalcy of the habitus and the emotional feedback from its servomechanical characteristics, often causes the medium to carry intimate and informal associations for frequent and regular texters. Intimacy does not necessitate informality, but the latter usually follows the former, especially at Bard College where most professors encourage students to call them by their first names. Informality indicates a degree of intimacy, which further indicates more flexible terms of engagement and “rules” that may only be understandable

to those involved in that particular intimate relationship, and thus, those particular shared channels. One most often texts those individuals with whom one already has an intimate relationship, and thus one can send a text which to a third party may seem cryptic or rude or ambiguous in tone, but is more likely to be understood perfectly by the intended recipient.

Informality implies not just informal word forms and spellings (which the language of texting often contains), but also informal conversational practices. For instance, texted conversations often do not begin with the standard salutations that spoken conversations do, nor do they usually end with formal farewells. Rather, texted conversations usually trail off as one side flickers and becomes engaged with another more present activity, or they are put on pause with the understanding that it will be picked up again later. Erving Goffman writes that “little ceremonies of greeting and farewell... provide a way of showing that a relationship is still what it was at the termination of the previous coparticipation...” (Goffman 1974:245-246). But because of the expected informality of the interaction through the texting medium, many participants assume that such formalities are unnecessary; in most cases, the state of the relationship is evident on the screen to the participants. Moreover, the persistent textual evidence of the relationship, which records verbatim what sentiments have been exchanged, may actually serve as a reminder of the intimacy shared between the partners via text. Indeed, Rich Ling notes,

With the mobile phone, teens are given the opportunity to develop these relationships as the need or desire arises. A call—or more commonly a text message—serves to refresh contact. The message serves to tie the group together through the development of a common history or narrative. (Ling 2004:111)

In the case of a particularly aggressive conversation, sometimes it is easier to not respond at all and thereby end the exchange by simply flickering out of the channel. Such a non-response may

be especially attractive since any spiteful feelings transmitted through the medium will be automatically recorded on both ends, ready to be revisited at any time in the future. And in the case of a friendly conversation, when departing salutations are expressed in text at all, they are usually variations of the already implied “talk to you later” that marks a perpetual state of talk; the more conclusive and formal “good bye” is generally avoided in texting.

Perhaps this play of intimacy and informality in the texting medium is most obvious when it is implemented for flirting. Indeed, it seems that texting for many students at Bard has become an integral aspect of not only maintaining romantic relationships, but also of initiating them. When I asked Willard if he feels like he’s missing out on anything by not texting, he responded with the following answer, each sentence running into each other as one stream of thought which I have portrayed with the use of commas instead of periods:

“Um yeah, because a lot of people prefer to communicate by texting, there’s a lot of kind of interactions that are really awkward, it’s really hard to hit on girls without texting, you pretty much just have to run into them and be like ‘hey let’s go somewhere right now’ ... it’s just hard to plan.”

In my observation, more flirting between acquaintances occurs through text message than any other medium including face-to-face. I have heard from countless informants of both genders that after the initial encounter(s) and the ritual of exchanging phone numbers, texting is the new “next step” for flirting. This is where all of the anxieties and ambiguities of the medium reach a peak, since one must appear relaxed, cool, and as if there was little at stake when in reality one feels that a single mis-text could ruin all chances of romance. One establishes contact with a romantic interest through the medium to test the waters, if you’ll excuse the pun, precisely because of the medium’s unique combination of informality, intimacy, and sense of distance. Yet all of these

conditions that one *expects* would make flirting easier actually puts on more pressure exactly because there is an additional layer of expected ease and casualness. Consider Tylor's response:

Tylor: It depends. I'll spend a good 5 minutes composing a four-word text to a romantic interest, but if it's about going to dinner with friends then nah, I won't think about it too much.

Dan: So it's got something to do with comfort and portrayal of your personality? Or something?

Tylor: Proofreading txts is complicated. I try to come off as casual and humorous, so if a txt to a potential date looks too composed and business like then I could be sending the wrong message

Tylor: On the other hand, I could also come on too strong by littering it up w smileys and exclamation points 🤔😏😏😏😏😏😏😏!!!!1111!!!!⁴

It is a delicate balance between seeming too aloof or formal and seeming overexcited almost to an obsessive degree. Going too far towards the former end of the spectrum, and the messages would be too ambiguous for the recipient to get the hint. Too far to the other end, however, and the recipient might become intimidated by the potential over-attachment a relationship may entail. According to Ilana Gershon, who researched the connection between new media and romantic relationships, a texter receiving too much attention may go so far as to avoid using her phone out of fear that the suitor's textual presence has appeared there since the last time she used it (Gershon 2010:157). Even calling the other person might "express too much interest" and "would be too forward a move" (24).

Some informants have reported that they have said things over text message that they probably would not have in person, especially in relation to flirting. The cause stems from the same reason why texting is perceived to be the most appropriate medium for flirting in the first place: one's *face* is masked and to a degree protected by text, allowing for a relatively safe and playful channel through which informal and casual contact can be established. The medium encourages not just experimentation with visual linguistic expression, but also with how those

⁴ Lucida Grande typeface indicates correspondence via text message.

expressions are utilized with whom and at which points in the relationship. If one becomes comfortable enough with a romantic or sexual interest over text, however, that feeling of comfort might transfer to one's relationship with the medium itself, possibly leading to inattentiveness. This seems to be what happened to an informant of mine one weekend when she unintentionally made plans with two individuals for the same night. In her words, "I told two different guys that I've been hooking up with to come to my room at the same time! It was an accident! I don't know how it happened!" This sense of comfort can thus quickly flip back into extreme anxiety due to a minor mistake so easily made in a multi-channel medium. She subsequently spent the rest of the night hiding in her room, afraid to see either person, and having her best friend with her to turn them both away in case they knocked on her door.

Because texting is so commonly used to initiate and maintain romantic relationships, a lack of texting activity could severely hinder one's romantic life. For instance, when Willard did have a texting plan, it became "the medium by which my girlfriend bothered me... and like nothing else." But it was only after Willard quit his texting plan that he and his girlfriend broke up. Willard's lack of a texting plan probably was not the main reason in their separation, but it seems to have been a possible contributing factor. Another informant, Cindy, had a slightly different problem: as a self-identifying chat-texter, when her phone was stolen on a semester abroad in Europe, her relationship with her boyfriend in the U.S. suffered from it. Having lost her primary means of communicating with him, Cindy's boyfriend expected her to "talk on the computer then all the time," which she refused to do, culminating in their break-up. It would appear that, among other reasons, Cindy's inability to conduct informally regular, impromptu conversations via text message contributed to the end of that particular relationship.

2. Maintaining Distance

Of course, the informality and intimacy of the texting medium is relative to other media. Several participants compared texting to email, saying that one would email one's professor, but one would generally not text a professor unless the two were unusually close; they perceive email as a medium for more formal activities such as bank statements, newsletters, business/employment, and academic interactions. One informant playfully complained to me about her experience with her internship manager: "He answered all of my questions when I texted him about Hannah Arendt and we had a long conversation about it, but he still refuses to email me about official things." It appears that her manager wanted to maintain informal contact with my informant while he was unprepared or unwilling to interact with her in the more formal channel. Furthermore, there has been much written about the inappropriateness of sharing important life news, such as getting married or a death in the family, as well as the unacceptability of ending a romantic relationship via text message (Gershon 2010:22-25). Indeed, during one of our meetings my advisor recounted an anecdote to me in which he overheard two individuals discussing the formality of sending condolences to someone whose friend or family member had passed away recently. The first woman in conversation was trying to avoid calling the would-be recipient of her condolences since the two were not very intimate, but she did not want to send a text message fearing that it would be too informal. Her friend agreed that a text message was indeed too informal for such a thing, but that an email would be sufficiently appropriate.

Formality indicates an emotional distance that requires a disjuncture between one's internal and external dispositions, the latter disposition playing along with the more rigid rules that accompany formal social situations. There is more risk to one's *face* due to the minefield of

formal expectations which may blow up in front of her if she takes one step in the wrong direction. For some individuals, this kind of performance is difficult to maintain, especially when the difficulty is intensified by the pressures of starting a new job. When I asked Tylor if he ever feels like he needs his phone, he responded: “I think my life would be a lot less convenient without it, especially now that I'm leaving college soon and starting to hunt for jobs. I guess that's the one thing I'd really NEED a phone for--employment. But I'd also be a lot less socially connected and I know I'd really hate that.” Willard also mentioned employment as one of the only reasons why he would reacquire a texting plan, since it is “normal” for employees to be easily contactable. The expectation for would-be employees to have a cell phone, a device which is oftentimes the same medium by which they conduct more casual matters, only compounds the difficulty and risk of performing formality.

Therefore, it came as quite a surprise for Sheila as she and I were having dinner one Sunday night when she received a text message from her prospective employer Lara asking if she could come in the following Thursday for training. Sheila, quite an active texter in her own right, felt unready to respond since she expected a call, not a text. Furthermore, she had two papers due that Friday, and so was hoping to reschedule her training for that Friday night instead. Faced with the unexpected means of delivery of her prospective employer's message, she panicked and consulted me on how to respond. Should she ask if Friday is ok? If so, should she directly follow the request by saying that she can “*absolutely* come Thursday if you need me”? Should she explain her situation with her essays? Would that make her seem unreliable? If she does offer the explanation, how short should it be? And should she follow *that* with an assurance

that “this is just a one time thing”? Should she express her gratitude? Should she end the message with an emoticon smile?

Sheila ended up satisfied with her initial moderate-length, moderately excited reply, which included all of the features above except for the emoticon (as we determined together that such a thing might be too informal). But as the text conversation continued and Lara made a minor misunderstanding, Sheila again became nervous and confused. Should she just repeat herself, since it appeared that Lara simply misread Sheila’s unambiguous response? Or should she reword the message as to not seem impatient or condescending? Among other things, Sheila worried about the length of each of her outgoing messages, fearing that a too short message could read as rude. Although the content of her messages were unambiguous, could the brevity of her messages be considered cold or terse? Should she supplement the messages with positive words of excitement to provide more “tone” and emotion? Indeed, text messages are generally short relative to a phone call or even an email, an attribute which in some contexts could verge on rudeness; a texted message that was instead spoken aloud could be considered terse.

Speaking about the situation a day later, Sheila said that up until that encounter she felt that texting was indeed informal and, to a degree, intimate. Afterwards, however, she—and I for that matter—realized that perhaps the texting medium has become so normalized that it may not be out of the ordinary for a prospective employer to text a would-be employee.

“Maintaining distance” has multiple meanings when applied to texting, one of which is the keeping an emotional distance through the performance of formality. Another meaning, however, is the maintenance of distant parties *as* distant parties. In other words, to maintain distance can mean to keep distant parties from interrupting one’s immediate attention. The

avoidance of some specific distant parties, however, may sometimes have negative consequences. The most common reason offered by my informants for remaining a texter or to want texting in the first place was to stay connected with distant friends and family. Implicit in this justification is that texting is one of the primary means of doing so, if for no other reason than because the medium is assumed to be more readily available due to its bodily incorporation, and more flexible than calls. Therefore, communication through the mobile phone is seen to be more direct with respect to time than other textual media, for instance, email. On the other hand, some individuals prefer texting over calls because texting can be done more sporadically, spontaneously, and with little time commitment. At the same time, the preference for texting over calls may come from one or both parties attempting to maintain a degree of distance, and thus autonomy and independence, which voice calls may sometimes supersede.

Sheila generally tries to text her mom back as soon as she can because she usually does not pick up her mom's calls. To Sheila, whose mom lives in Canada, phone calls are too personal as well as too interruptive. Because of the distance and infrequency of voice communication, Sheila sometimes feels compelled to speak to her mother for an hour or longer. However, such long conversations wear on Sheila, and so she may ignore her mother's next call, thus forming a feedback loop of disregard. To make up for her bad call habits with her mother, Sheila instead tries to maintain contact via text, but even in that medium, Sheila is not very regular with her attempts to contact, partially because it is very expensive to do so and partially because she knows her mom is not as comfortable with texting as she is. Sheila has admitted to me that she knows that her texting, even if she were regular with it, and even if her mother "got it," would not make up for her phone call irregularity. Her mother, who actually uses the

iPhone's speech-to-text function, does not perceive the texting medium as intimate enough to maintain contact with her distant daughter. Yet Sheila hopes that she can trick her mom as well as herself into thinking that it is enough, and acts upon that hope. For Sheila, who perhaps becomes more frustrated with her mother than most young 20-somethings, the avoidance of phone calls and hiding behind infrequent text messages is a way to simultaneously maintain physical and emotional distance while also bridging the gap just frequently enough; she establishes her emotional independence from her mother while at the same time letting her mother know that she is, in Sheila's words, "still alive."

Tylor had a similar problem to Sheila when a romantic partner visited him for the weekend. In an interview with him, he revealed having to deal with the conflict between his own phone habits, the expectations distant texting partners had for him, and the expectations his co-present romantic partner held:

- Dan: Haha. Do you ever feel like you've ignored your phone for too long?
 Tylor: Yea I'm always anxious to check it as soon as I'm out of the shower and
 Tylor: if I don't look at it when I wake up I usually end up missing texts and regretting it.
 Dan: Heh. How often do you generally check your phone?
 Tylor: I've hardly taken my hand off it for the past hour and a half, but otherwise maybe every 10 mins or so if I'm not sleeping or in class or something
 Tylor: So about as often as I check my watch, I suppose
 Dan: Haha ok. What else would prevent you from checking it?
 Tylor: Athletic/outdoor vacationy things, like skiing, swimming, cowell house... and sex.
 Tylor: And job interviews.
 Dan: Haha fair enough. But not a face-to-face nonprofessional conversations?
 Tylor: Ugh I've been getting so much worse about that, I realized I was txtng in front of Franny way too much this weekend
 Tylor: Especially considering how dangerously little she thinks about her phone... Her parents texted me after she left because they hadn't heard back from her since saturday!
 Dan: Hmm do you feel like your phone-rhythm changes when your SO [significant other] is not very mindful of her phone?
 Tylor: I do feel a tinge of guilt when answering txts in front of her. Sometime's I'll save them for when I'm sitting on the toilet or when she's in the bathroom or something
 Tylor: *sometimes

One force pulls him to almost compulsively check his phone several times an hour, yet another impulse pushes the extended channels on his phone away to allow more attention on his significant other with whom he is alone in his room rather than on friends and family who are distant to varying degrees. When these forces meet, Tylor feels “a tinge of guilt” in his words, no less because the relationship is long-distance and the weekend he recounts was the first time the two had been together in a couple weeks, nor because Franny herself does not seem to be a very active texter. Time shared between the two is limited, and thus he tries (with varying degrees of success) not to use that time-and-space shared with Franny tending to other individuals but rather solely tending to Franny. It is this “texting in front of” an immediately present, rarely texting, romantic partner that Tylor tries to avoid, sometimes using private bathroom time as a discrete period separate from his time with Franny to attend more distant social matters.

3. Flickering Between Channels

One may also interpret Tylor’s guilt as a discomfort with the punctuation of time that regular texting forces upon the user. One expectation of texting is the ability to skillfully punctuate one’s minutes into discrete moments of divided attention: a texter is ideally able to flicker between text correspondence channels with Person A, Person B, and Person C, as well as non-text interactions with persons present in the immediate here-and-now, all in the span of a few minutes. Indeed, some texters on the one hand pride themselves on responding to messages instantaneously, while on the other hand almost all texters I interviewed accepted the common likelihood of not receiving a timely response. Or, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that

most texters would “give them a few minutes unless I know that they don't have a habit of responding immediately... and then I kind of give up. Right away” in the words of Cindy, at which point the average texter from my findings would more-or-less forget about their own sent message until a response arrived. The exception, of course, is if the initial message was urgent or otherwise time-specific. Another exception is if the recipient is known by the sender to check her phone often, in which case the sender may feel as if he is being ignored. Thus, the expectation is not necessarily that the texter can carry a sustained and uninterrupted conversation via text, but rather that the text-recipient can set aside and demarcate a discrete moment at an appropriate time (relative to the urgency of the initial message) to compose and send a reply. This expectation differs from face-to-face or even phone call conversations because of the asynchronous quality of texting compared to the contemporaneous nature of the other two communication forms.

Although the practice of flickering is expected and common to the new habitus, it is not always easy. During one particularly confusing conversation between a few friends and me, I jokingly criticized Zack's texting in front of us and his consequential disengagement from our discussion, to which he responded: “Oh come on! I have to follow three conversations there (*pointing at us*) and twenty... thousand conversations in here (*pointing at his phone*).” Despite the exaggeration, his reply was an expression of frustration at all of the staggered timeframes he felt the need to manage. One of his close friends had previously described Zack as casting “a wide net” socially and “hanging out with whoever bites,” which probably contributed to his minor attention crisis at the time. Trying to attend to so many channels can be exhausting, even to a frequent texter like Zack; at the time of his attention crisis, Zack was lounging on his bed

while the rest of us were standing in his room, partially to physically remove himself from the channel of our conversation, but also as if he had to sit and remain stationary while his multiple potential presences shot through the mobile medium to their intended targets.

Flickering between just two channels, however, is quite standard for many of my informants. From my observations, alternatively attending to a channel in the immediate context and a channel through one's phone is the most common pair to toggle between. Chastisement for such behavior by co-present individuals is uncommon between acquaintances and rare between strangers. I have witnessed several students in my classes obviously flicker between phone and lecture (despite many informants claiming that they would not text in front of a professor), but I have only ever heard professors remark upon the behavior outside of class. Criticism from friends, however, is a different story. Although such criticism between friends is usually done either jokingly, as I did with Zack, the friends of the offending person may be serious (sometimes under the guise of playfulness) and consider it a recurring problem. One informant, Petra, is one of those individuals whose friends consider her flickering habits to be rude and problematic. One can often find her in the dining hall with a group of her friends around dinner time, tapping away at her phone while her friends joke and talk. She may flicker into the conversation to give her two-cents, and then flicker back to whomever she is texting. As I have mentioned previously, such behavior in a large group can be permissible if it is not sustained for very long, but Petra seems to be perpetually flickering regardless of the social situation. Even when I have spoken to her one-on-one, she will occasionally say, "Keep going, I'm listening" as she pulls out her phone to read and respond to a message.

Even considering the seriousness with which friends may criticize a flickering friend, when a person is reading or composing a text message, bystanders for the most part leave the person alone since she has clearly switched her attention to another partner. It is generally considered rude to interrupt someone else's spoken conversation mid-sentence, after all. It appears that a similar, but more flexible, rule applies to texting; the most significant difference being that the would-be interrupter cannot hear the texting partner on the other side of the phone, and thus has more difficulty judging the appropriateness of his interruption. Every informant I asked said that they regularly witness individuals texting while a conversation was occurring around them, and most informants admitted to doing it on occasion themselves. Texting in front of others, then, may be at times considered rude, but it is very common to the point that it is usually not noted upon. Or rather, it would appear that texting is viewed as brief enough to warrant the patience by other co-present individuals to allow the recipient to read and respond (if the recipient chooses), but distant enough for the practice to not be exceedingly disruptive when performed in the middle of a spoken conversation.

4. Adaptation to an iPhone Culture, or "Join the Borg"

At Bard College, where MacBooks completely outnumber PC laptops in almost every classroom, having an iPhone is less about claiming a particular social status and more about maintaining consistency, both socially with one's peers and practically with one's other devices. This is not to say that every MacBook owner has an iPhone; but I have witnessed on more than one occasion a student sincerely ask another student why she does not own an iPhone. One iPhone toting informant told me that she feels "slightly anxious when I text someone for the first

time and the messages are green instead of blue”; the latter color indicating interaction with another iPhone, and the former indicating interaction with a non-iPhone. Again, this show of surprise was usually not contemptuous, even when it was expressed behind the person’s back, but the accompanying emotion was rather what seemed to be genuine confusion, as if for a split-second it was unfathomable to not own an iPhone.

Sometimes, however, the peer pressure to acquire an iPhone and assimilate to what seems to be the “normal” device at Bard is much more assertive. Such was the case when I recorded a conversation between three other friends and me, one of whom owns a basic phone while the rest of us own iPhones. Zack, one of the iPhone owners, was reminiscing about his old basic phone while Stacy, a basic phone owner, was expressing her frustration about receiving iPhone group messages:

Zack: Yeah I had like a phone with only two colors of green... *You used to feel so much more connected to your message when you had to type it out... when you heard the clickies?*

Sheila: Yeah.

Dan: Yeah?

Zack: When you could text without looking(?) But now fucking iPhones you can't do it at all it's like uggghh!

Stacy: See, I still have a clicky phone.

Dan: Mhm.

Sheila: Yeah you can't do it yeah.

Zack: (sigh) It's just not the same.

Sheila: Oh yeah you do!

Zack: Remember you had a character limit? We don't have a fucking character limit anymore. It's changed everything. I could write a novel now. I am not limited to 160 characters. That's changed it a lot. *I can like write out an entire thought.*

Stacy: See I can't send out long texts 'cause on my phone it's just impossible... like group messages... group messages don't happen for my phone.

Dan: Right right.

Zack: Group messages are hilarious. They also suck.

Stacy: *They suck so bad! They interrupt my phone and make it spazz out so I can't use it for like half an hour.*

Zack: Yeah you need...

Stacy: heh, a new phone?

Zack: You need to get with the times. You're gonna be a...you know...slow on the evolution train.

Stacy: Hey.

Zack: You're not post-human like us iPhone users.

Stacy: Hey. hehehehe. Oh my god dude no.

Zack: We can connect to all of the internet...

Stacy: No.

Zack: We're post-human, definitely.

Sheila: Yeah. Where are you? Your pebble is so shitty. Fuck youuu. Get with the times!

Zack: You're what's slowing down the evolution of humanity.

Sheila: You're outdated! You're slowing us down!

Stacy: Oh, my god. Guys?

Sheila: The rut!

Zack: Assimilate. Join the Borg.

Sheila: Giant pot-hole in civilization!

Stacy: Oh my god.

Sheila: You suck. Fill the hole.

Stacy: Dude, shut the fuck...(laughter)

Sheila: Dude I'm just kidding. Dude dude it's ok. Not a huge hole. Maybe like hurting like a few thousand people or something.

Stacy: Oh my god. I cannot be around anthro majors.
(my own emphases)

The comments made toward Stacy by Zack and Sheila express a common pressure from peers for non-smart phone users to “upgrade,” although the two are much more explicit about their iPhone-bias and aggressive about their opinions than the ambient pressure some students at Bard experience. Because Zack and Sheila are close friends of Stacy, they act unsympathetic, playfully but aggressively teasing her about her basic prosthesis. The two claim to be superior in one way or another, historicizing her phone (and by extension, her) as primitive. Zack even proclaims with tongue-in-cheek pride the “post-human” status of iPhone users. Furthermore, Sheila jokes that Stacy is actually hurting humanity by not adapting to the higher-tech device.

For Stacy at least, being surrounded by iPhone users generates strong peer pressure to “upgrade” to an iPhone.

On the other hand, another noteworthy feature of this conversation is how Zack just moments earlier had nostalgically recounted how “connected” he felt to his messages when he pressed actual buttons and “heard the clickies.” He extolls the virtues of having an iPhone, but he also begins to answer the question: at what cost? Feeling less connected to his messages, for Zack at least, was apparently worth “upgrading” to an iPhone. Zack’s nostalgic reflection marks a particularly poignant example of a common desire to “upgrade” to the most cutting-edge prosthesis, even while ignoring that one may lose some of the old phone’s virtues in the process.

Other students may have incorporated their phones to their own respective habitus, but that phone and habitus may not be consistent with the habitus of their peers. Such is the case with Stacy and her basic phone’s inability to effectively process iPhone group messages except as picture messages. Stacy can text just fine on her phone, but when it comes to forces outside her own control, such as a barrage of picture messages from multiple individuals sometimes simultaneously, her phone might “spazz out” and leave few gaps of time between incoming messages for her to tap out a response, or perform any task on her phone for that matter. For a busy person like Stacy, who is exceptionally skilled at budgeting her time, one of the fundamental uses of her phone is as a clock. Yet when her phone becomes incapacitated by what is effectively a texting version of a DoS (denial-of-service) attack, she feels anxious waiting for distant texters—her friends—to release her prosthesis from the back-to-back demands and give it a break. This virtual attack effectively blocks off all other channels on her phone, interrupting her attention on one of those channels if she is using her phone at the time. If she is fortunate

enough to not be on her phone at the time, the attack still interrupts her attention from another channel by incessantly demanding her to attend to her phone, a futile task since there is nothing she can do to halt the incoming deluge short of turning her phone off; and even then, the processing of all those messages will merely be postponed until she turns her phone on again. She had expressed to me in other conversations that when there is something wrong with her phone, she feels like there is something wrong with *her*, as if she cannot handle the many demands other people make of her. But in Stacy's words, "It's not like I can just not text."

5. Texting an Interview

I was intrigued by these tensions of texting between the formal and informal, distance and proximity, concision and ambiguity. I wanted to play with these conflicting expectations in texting experimentally. Therefore, I conducted an interview with Tylor, a good friend of mine, via text message. The interview was performed over the course of a week: he and I would sit in our separate dorm rooms only a flight of stairs apart, and after our thumbs and brains had become tired from such unusually sustained texting activity, we would meet up and talk about the experience. We would exchange many long messages for a few hours straight in one evening, only to continue with another continuous set of hours a couple days later. To conduct the totality of the interview in one sitting would have taken literally all day.

I found that while my messages were initially relatively formal and brief, composed almost entirely of pre-planned questions, I soon became more comfortable with the balance of formality and informality that Tylor and I achieved. Between sessions, Tylor informed me that he, too, was treating the interview seriously by trying to provide longer-than-average, rich

responses to my questions. But after I asked him to loosen up a little and treat the interview more like a normal text conversation, he started to exhibit more informal tendencies. For example, he sent quite a few emoticons, as in the following excerpt:

Dan: After using your phone do you always know what time it is?
 Tylor: No, I guess checking the time on my phone isn't something I naturally do. I suspect I'll be doing so more frequently during our interview though :P

He often omitted punctuation at the end of the text, which is also apparent in the above example.

Additionally, he used the informal “/” to mean “or” as in the next example:

Dan: How do you feel when a piece of technology is taking longer to perform than you thought it would?
 Tylor: Depends on the function, but it can be pretty frustrating, especially when a program is simply not responding to input/crashes.[...]

Yet, Tylor also used the “/” to mean that two things are approximately the same, or that they are two words for the same thing but he was not willing to just use one over the other, as in the following excerpt:

Tylor: I do indeed have a facebook, and I'd say anywhere btw half an hour to 2hrs, depending on whether I'm using its chat/message function. It's also hard to calculate because I'm constantly switching btw fb and links that I find there. I'm pretty much always logged on if I'm on the internet for anything else.

Furthermore, displayed above is his usage of abbreviations, like the “btw” usage I described previously, as well as “fb” for “Facebook” and “hrs” for “hours,” obviously expecting me to understand these meanings without explanation. In addition to abbreviations, Tylor also occasionally played with the sounds of words, lengthening some words (a common practice to give temporal length to text) (source) as well as adding or replacing specific letters to spell them as he would say them outloud:

Tylor: Yeeerp sounz good

By subconsciously responding to his feedback, I, too, became less formal and more chatty, interjecting between his turn and my next question to make comments about his responses irrelevant to the interview:

Dan: How often do you lose your phone/leave it at home?
 Tylor: My phone just vibrated off of the windowsill and into a cardboard box of beer empties, but I found it immediately and I've otherwise been pretty good(/bad?) at taking my phone everywhere and not losing it.
 Dan: Hahahahaha interview gold.

He would also joke and poke fun at the more-or-less serious nature of the interview by playing with the expectation for well-typed responses. At this particular gag, I impulsively tapped out an expression of laughter and sent the message before I realized that I should ask for greater elaboration:

Dan: Do you ever proofread your texts before sending them?
 Tylor: Absoluty alwas
 Tylor: *most of the time
 Dan: Lololol
 Dan: Why?

Tylor told me after the official interview had ended that because I am his friend, he felt more comfortable joking and exhibiting other informal attributes with me than he would have with a stranger or a distant acquaintance. He even expressed feeling “giddy” about the whole experiment, excited for how it would turn out. Moreover, he reported that he had actually felt uncomfortable with his initial formal tone, worried that it might add a layer of inauthenticity that would devalue the experiment. Consequently, he fell into a more “natural” rhythm (for him) of texting, worrying less about maintaining a certain formal tone and caring more about the detail he put into his responses.

Despite trying to avoid the formality of an interview, our experiment was exemplary of a typical texting interaction either. The activity was sustained for hours at a time, with me doing

nothing more than reading his responses and transcribing the questions I had on my computer to my phone. During these sessions, Tylor would also have to commit himself to the activity.

While I would merely transcribe questions (some of which were long), he would have to *answer* them; and judging by the length and thoughtfulness of the responses I received from him, along with his own spoken report of his experience between sessions, I can imagine that he, too, did little else while participating in the interview. One day, when he did not respond for about twenty minutes, I became desperate and sent several texts in a short amount of time. When he responded, he only participated for about ten minutes, sending only four texts (compared to my nine) before he had to stop to attend to his friend who was visiting that night. It turned out that in that particular case, ten minutes was about the maximum amount of time he felt comfortable taking away from his co-present company, unwilling to flicker between his friend and me. But that is the way some texters negotiate their relationships with their phones: by avoiding what seems to be such a basic practice of texting, and instead sustaining attention on one channel at a time.

Conclusion

Feedback loops are integral to a plethora of systems both organic and artificial, as well as those systems that fall in between. *Habitus* is one such system as it produces the practices and dispositions that further reproduces the system, thus providing the conditions for its own continued existence. Bodily incorporation of one's phone, a consequential part of internalizing the texting habitus, also functions as a feedback system by attaching one's phone to one's sense of identity, thereby shaping one's functional identity in relation to the practices one performs with one's phone. Servomechanism, a type of bodily incorporation, may also implement the user's emotions projected onto a device to make the user *feel needed by the device*, or in other words, to make the user emotionally invested in her own bodily and mental extension. Talk between two or more parties requires feedback loops as well in the form of *anticipated feedback*, without which participants would have a difficult time trying to respond relevantly to any utterance. Moreover, the perpetual state of talk is a feedback loop as it utilizes recorded texting activity to generate expectations for more texting activity. At least two different kinds of feedback loops, sensory and social, are necessary for successful telepresence, since they sustain one's attention in the distant place where the telepresence exists. Many of these systems overlap or constitute a part of another system: feedback loops within feedback loops.

These feedback systems in the texting habitus also compel other practices, perhaps most notably the *flickering* behavior common to so many texters. Attention channels are not just the empty trenches through which streams of information flow; they are also both the conduits for feedback as well as the routes by which presences are made present. Flickering between channels, then, quickens the flow both of information and of the feedback systems, since

sustained texting activity in one channel is exceedingly uncommon; by flickering between multiple channels, one experiences many times the amount of texting practices one would get from just a single channel. Even if the user does not receive any new messages from a distant texting partner that would update the partner's textual-presence for the user, that textual-presence is still "refreshed" (in the sense of reloading a webpage) for the user every time she flickers back to it. At the same time, flickering helps to conflate all texting channels into one set of faceless, spaceless, timeless, and personally standardized but perpetually shifting texting practices from which the texter draws, with context-dependent modifications, the next time she participates in texting activity. This blurring of texting channels together, along with the frequent refreshing of textual-presences, in turn reproduces the very feedback systems responsible for these phenomena: a fractal chain of möbius feedback loops fed between the texter and the cultural medium. When Marshall McLuhan said, "the medium is the message," he meant that the meaning of a medium is composed of the broad social and phenomenological changes the medium introduces, regardless of the content of the medium (McLuhan 1964:7). The message of texting, then, might be this: the new habitus demands perpetual mobile and asynchronous connection to a world of multiple staggered timeframes and attention channels accessed primarily through a digital prosthesis incorporated into the body.

This project is not by any means meant to be a comprehensive study of every cell phone practice and related cultural norm at Bard College. There are many issues I knowingly left out: the different effects of certain drugs on the phenomenological texting experience, the possible differences in texting practices according to gender, socio-economics of cell phone ownership and use, sexting, etc. Because the explicit subject of this project is *texting*, I also excluded to a

great extent other social apps many texters with smart phones regularly use such as Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, etc. These other social apps also have transformative effects on the user and the user's social environment, and I hope that some of the theory that I have woven together and invented may be useful for the analysis of such media.

There is no way of knowing, however, how long "texting" will remain a relevant term to describe some of the behaviors I have outlined in this project. Already, some of the text-based practices many texters perform on their smart phones can no longer be accurately described as "texting." Is updating one's Facebook status or posting a tweet considered "texting" because they are both textual and may be performed through one's phone? At this moment in the etymological evolution of the word "texting," I would have to argue that it is not. Five or ten years down the line, however, when future phones and perhaps even interfaces like Google Glass use non-textual media more extensively, perhaps the term "texting" will conflate with other text-based activities to indicate any such practice performed on a mobile device. Or perhaps this project will seem hopelessly irrelevant in the near future due to the speed of change of these media, these feedback systems, and even the vocabulary and linguistic structures used to sustain abstracted discussions of these concepts. In any case, this project is meant to outline some of the features of this new mobile, textual, asynchronous, incorporated, and flickering habitus, the consequences of which I believe go beyond mere texting. What happens to this new habitus next—whether it is superseded by another new habitus, slowly evolved into a different but related form, or completely rejected—depends on the next generation of young media users, whatever name they take.

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