Section 1
Sharing Experience

Introduction: Sharing Experience

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The social life of technology is something frequently rediscovered in our investigations of technology. In the early 1980s, it was Kling in his article on the social contexts of technology use (Kling 1980). In the early 1990s, it was the field of computer-supported collaborative work that took on the challenges of understanding technology's many faceted place in social life. Most recently, the advent of collaborative Internet technologies – Facebook and its like has brought the social use of technology to public attention and broadened the number of research fields seeking to understand the increasingly intertwined issues of social life and technology.

Perhaps the biggest change in research interests on this topic has been the shift from considering solely work contexts, to understanding activities that take place outside what we would normally think of as work. While we are used to the over-powering importance of the workplace in our discussions and investigations, leisure demands as much attention. Indeed, it is interesting to reflect that the average American over his/her whole life will spend more time watching television in his home than spend time in the workplace. Moreover, television watching is something that is increasingly mediated through a computer in some form – be it a set top box, tivo, or bittorrrent (Barkhuus and Brown 2008).

Our social engagements outside work take two dominant forms, those involving family and friends. And for both of these, technology has always played a major role. In 1885, Bertha Benz used an early car to drive 80 km to visit her parents–the first documented social use of the car (Urry 2007). Nowadays, many social relationships would be near impossible without modern communication and transport systems to maintain contact. With the advent and extensive use of social networking sites, dating websites, and online gaming, we find that new friendships are increasingly forming online, alongside the incorporation of these technological systems in how friendships develop and are maintained, particularly amongst teenagers.

Yet, the dominant way in which social relationships and their mediation through technology has been documented has been social network analysis (Degenne and

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Forsé 1999; Wellman and Berkowitz 2006). Social network analysis has its roots in the so-called "small world" problem–the attempt to analyze how well-connected individuals are and to explore the nature of these connections. In Millgrams' classic small world experiment, he explored if individuals could forward on a letter to an ambiguously described individual, with each forwarding of the letter being taken as a probe into individuals' social connections (Milgram et al., 1977). These sort of connections have been used to analyze social connections using the graph theory–where social connections are reduced to a relationship between two nodes of a graph. The graph theory can then predict the importance of certain relationships to preserve the cohesion of the graph and presumably the social network.

Much of this work, however, relies upon removing the contents of relationships–their reduction to pair-wise relationships. This may prove to be important for some kinds of activities (e.g., finding a new job), but the broader implication for our social lives is questionable. Finding a job is a very specific economic activity, not as often undertaken as other activities. Focusing on job searches as an activity is representative of an overly economic approach to social life, one that ignores the importance of our face-to-face interactions, in contrast to individualistic notions of asocial calculating actors. If we consider what social relationships mean the most to us emotionally, we would be unlikely to pick any from the large number of relatively lightweight connections. Whatever the role of these relationships in certain highly circumscribed activities (such as finding a new job, vs. getting promoted in one's own job) they are much less important than, say, getting a mate.

It is the contents of relationships and in particular what we do with our families or our friends that skips out of consideration in these analyses. Friends do very different things together than families, with different rights, responsibilities, and the like. Social relations show a huge variety and take many different forms. One form we have is the light connections between friends, how we might guess what a friend is doing at some point in time, our ongoing awareness of each others' activity. This was one application area that we explored with the "connecto" system, where friends could share with each other an awareness of where they were and their current activity (Barkhuus et al., 2008). We see this echoed in the use of status messages in Facebook. At the other extreme, we have close face-to-face intimate relationships. For example, the experience of going on holiday with a friend or family member, where we spend much time sharing just about everything we do for a short period of time.

The experience of those on holiday is very different from that of two friends sharing a text message during the working day. It is the contents of relationships then – what people do together– that is crucial to understanding shared interactions. It is particularly in the building of technology that these questions come to the fore. If one is interested in building technology for shared encounters, it is important that we build for real activities that sit within the world of friendship and family interactions. As the chapters in the next section show, for technology we must reflect in original ways on how to bring people together through their shared interactions and exchanges.

Jacucci et al. discuss the opportunities for collocated user interactions in public displays, both mobile and situated. In Konomi et al.'s chapter they explore how technology can bring the history of different places into the engaged interactions in

conference settings. For Diamantaki et al. the exploration is more the way in which locative media can support and engage with our shared interactions. Lastly, Chorianopoulos et al. explore the different ways in which interactions around maps can be supported and the range of different engagements technology might support.

All these four chapters demonstrate an interest in supporting situated face-to-face shared interactions – and moving beyond a reduction of our social exchanges to mere lines on a graph. The growing interest in leisure activity is just one facet of this, but there is still much work to be done–attempting to understand and design for shared interactions.

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