

DATA DONOR

DATA DONOR explores the social topology of the mobile-phone world, and embraces a café with intelligent tables, some takeaway plastic sculptures, and a social-science research project.

BACKGROUND

The proposal as outlined below has emerged from a fascination with some aspects of the virtual territory of mobile-phone social-space, and with a now-classic piece of social-network research conducted in the 1960's with the aid of the mailing system¹.

I'm interested in the way the mobile has slanted us away from the world of the telephone directory (which looks increasingly like the product of an older mindset in its preference for a very fixed, listable existence). There is a paradox in that the mass of essentially-arbitrary mini-directories held in everyone's handset lends itself (as a dataset) readily to cross-referencing and all the other tricks of data-merging and data-analysis, yet remains effectively inaccessible to any kind of overview. Providing for accessibility would be technically straightforward, except that the requisite data-download facility isn't a standard handset feature.

Rebuilding the handset in this way would thus converge the mobile-phone with existing tools for direct acquisition of research data. A readymade system would then exist for running on a very broad scale, an effective, intriguing and contemporarily-defined research project in the tradition of Milgram's classic work (though this time we'd explicitly be modelling a floating world). A mass mapping along these lines should reveal, not only who's connected to whom, but the *pattern* of their connections, a topology of the whole complex distributed network of mobile-phone users. What features, anticipated or otherwise, would this topology possess? Even just to formalise it, and to present it in useful and accessible form, would present interesting challenges.

¹ Stanley Milgram's research into what has become known as the Small World Phenomenon, which showed that on average, individuals in the U.S. were mutually connected by chains of about six links of acquaintanceship: far fewer than had been anticipated.

I'm intrigued, too, by a recently-emerged phenomenon; the rapt silent space of the mobile-phone user as she/he pages through their numbers, texting this one, checking the entry for that one. We're seeing the telephone detoured, paradoxically, into a device for silence and (apparent) inwardness – oddly echoing something that happened with the book some centuries ago, when *it* began to get portable. So a shift in the technology enables once again a recasting of a particular social space, a space of imaginative engagement.

PROPOSAL

An ambitious social-science research project is proposed, into the topology of the social network constituted by mobile-phone users. But unconventionally, the gathering of data is presented as work-in-progress, as part of a tripartite public installation. This installation is conceived as a site of reflection on the fluid nature of social networks, as well as on the social mores of information-exchange. Part 'intelligent café', part studio/workshop, part research laboratory, its aim is to embrace both divergence and convergence of thought, and to actively engage visitors and contributors of information in the research's imaginative domain.

The installation's three complementary spaces lead one into the other, are visitable in any order, and are open to all. Through the relationships of café to studio to laboratory, subjective aspects of social and 'connected' space are also emphasised, and the project's essential seriousness of purpose is counterpointed by a somewhat playful approach to ideas of information and organism.

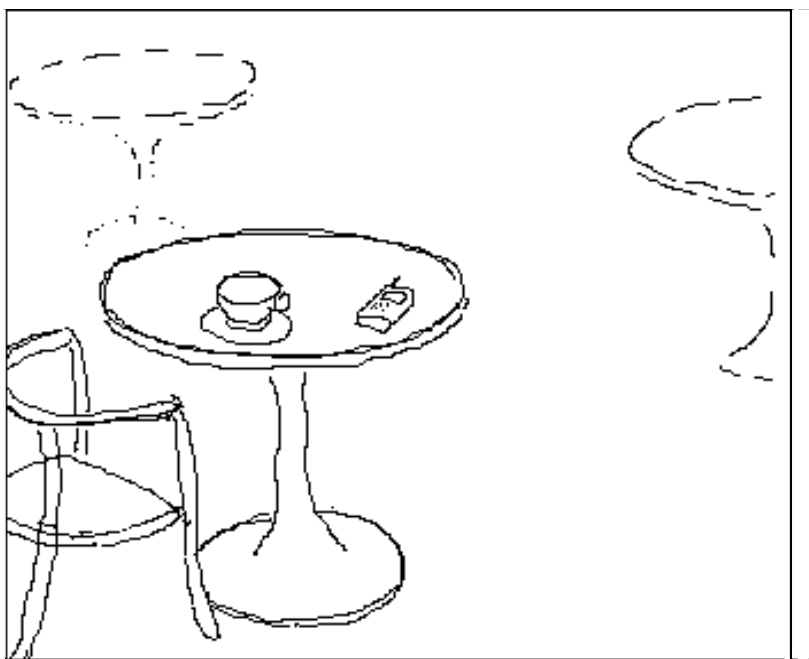
As for the research project itself: a new social landscape would be explored, one which it seems (from an initial search) has not yet been examined in this kind of way². Unlike research of Milgram's original type, the project would aim at charting an extensive social space, where all connections between all individuals (providers of data and their contacts) are plotted. Obviously, to achieve all this, research collaborations would need to be set up. Equally obviously, it would be a great advantage for the DATA DONOR project as described to be run as a multi-site project. For a number of reasons of practicality, it would however be wise to regard this current proposal as a cut-down version of the big one, a dry-run to look at its full potential.

² A team at Ohio State University are hoping to map the social topography of people connected through use of email, the closest parallel I have been able to find.

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The *intelligent café* is furnished with tables specially designed as data-conduits. Coffee, tea, etc. are free. A quiet zone, you can ruminate on issues your visit raises... but set your mobile down on the table, as people do, and you're invited to feed (by automatic transfer) its memorised names and numbers into the research database. There's no need to be alarmed: the evolved mobile's interface allows you to hold back any that you might prefer not to pass on. As in any social transaction, the ethics are for you to negotiate (an acknowledgement of the wholly subjective aspects of what is being researched.) And should it be needed, the café is manned by friendly assistants ready to come and help with data-download.

The café table, of course, exemplifies the issues of 'public', 'private' and 'imaginative' space that are integral to the DATA DONOR project. All cafés



are fluid crossovers of public and private thresholds, and the café table – any café table – has a wonderful transformative ability to define immediately a personal or a social space. Such spaces also, ritualistically, offer you time: and in the 'intelligent café', the time to ponder before

committing each of your contacts to the research database.

The *intelligent café* takes advantage of all of this – as well as of the tendency of users, sitting down, to place their mobile *there* (as an act of priority), beside them on the table, talismanic, poised for that moment of engagement, that switch into another psycho-social dimension.

The *studio/workshop* is where, having downloaded your data, you get something in return: a cable-tie/zip-tie sculpture (with potential allusion to notions of

connectiveness, dataflow, network structure, ties that bind, etc.) These small pieces, as simple as two nylon twists in countertorsion or as complex as the makers' imaginations allow, are for you to take what you choose. This space is home to a team of selected helpers whose role is to make these sculptures (according to a set of simple constraints) and distribute them. This user-friendly team, and likewise those working in the café and in the research lab, is also there to offer conversation, and generally to operate as any recently-composed social unit might; thus exemplifying the micro-scale 'slipperiness' of the kind of network that on a broader scale the research-project is investigating.

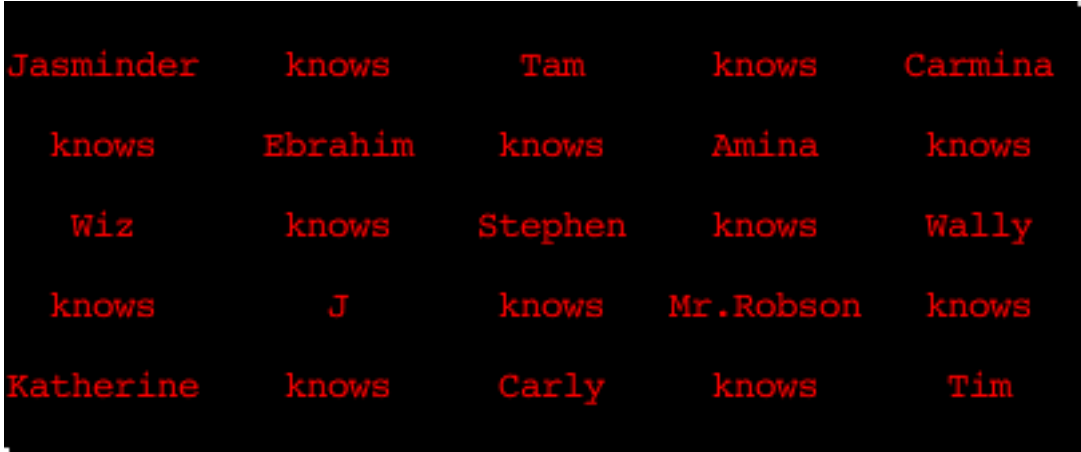
Issues of transactional interchange are central to DATA DONOR: another culturally-embedded method, when carefully tuned, for promoting a particular kind of imaginative engagement. Thus, in the *studio/workshop*, the exchange of something material (a sculptural object of negligible intrinsic value) for something immaterial (those names and numbers). It's not a commercial transaction (among the protocols that the project's presentation must make clear), but a symbolic one: if you give something, you should get something back, and something that underlines the nature of the exchange. The values that participants themselves ascribe to the transaction are for each to determine, and form part of the project's complexity of content.



The *research lab* is where a model of the social network comprised by mobile-phone users is being elaborated. The emerging research picture is communicated through 3D network models, graphic and interactive displays, texts, etc.

Research assistants are always present, primed to discuss and explain, but also simply because the project is *live*, is developing (maybe hesitantly at first, before macro connections begin to cross-link the micro networks input by individuals) as data is contributed. It is envisaged that the research lab would also have an online presence through which findings would be communicated.

At the hub of DATA DONOR's enfolding architecture, where the lab meets the separate spaces of café and studio, is another zone, smaller, more of a threshold than a defined space. Here is sited a more playful derivation of everyone's downloaded data: an array of LED/LCD text in continuous flux from bottom right to top left, a rippling biaxial field constantly replenishing itself and representing a true (but arbitrary) changing cross-section, not only of who knows whom (A KNOWS B KNOWS C KNOWS D KNOWS...), but also of how we choose to identify each other (ABBREVIATION@ KNOWS NICKNAME# KNOWS NICKNAMEØ KNOWS ABBREVIATION¥...) In contrast with the abstractions that the 'serious' research project necessarily trades in, it reveals a more subjectively-defined reality, compelling and perhaps unexpected for the way it displays, like a geological cross-section, a close-up example of the constitution of our 'micro' networks, and the way they rapidly intermesh in the broader structure of the landscape.



Jasminder knows Tam knows Carmina
knows Ebrahim knows Amina knows
Wiz knows Stephen knows Wally
knows J knows Mr.Robson knows
Katherine knows Carly knows Tim