On Mobile Communication, Cultural Norms...

Jon: Late this summer, we met up in New York City to discuss *interactions*. We spent a bunch of time in an office and a bunch of time wandering around the city. While we certainly got a fair amount done in the office, I can't help but feel like the time spent in pubs, shops, galleries, and cabs had more impact on the future of the magazine.

Richard: Though those office meetings, some with several other people and all facilitated by invaluable whiteboards, were critical, I feel the same as you.

To me, this was due, at least in part, to our in-person “mobile communication,” facilitated and fed by a richness of the shared experience of NYC. That differs from the mobile communication described so nicely by Rich Ling in this issue and in his books. However, it too is an important part of our mobile society, though one not always adequately acknowledged or supported.

Jon: But it was something more than that—it was the feeling of technical culture intermingling with the traditional analog spirit of a big city. For example, I was astounded to see how omnipresent LCD panels have become; they are, for example, not just in cabs but on top of them too, and it seems like even an elevator ride up three floors can't be complete without a Fox News feed.

Yet at the same time that the city has become overcome with technology, the culture of the city was alive with more traditional human interactions: Sixth Avenue, closed to automobile traffic; a “pay what you want” art exhibit; people playing chess in Washington Square Park. This combination—the old and new, digital and analog—is, I think, what Christine Satchell is talking about when she alludes to the periphery.

Did you feel this sense of “seeing culture” in the periphery, as I did?

Richard: I enjoyed watching the staff of the old neighborhood Italian restaurant we ate in one evening as you and a former student of yours exchanged text messages with other former students of yours, inviting them to join us. Some of those other students eventually arrived to share our table, but did so at different times such that everyone's ordering and dining was staggered. This is a part of the

mobile society that Ling does discuss, but as reflected in the changing faces and moods of the restaurant staff, it was not within their cultural norm.

Jon: But what is in their cultural norm is a sense of a community and sharing, and a large, boisterous, drawn-out dinner—which we certainly enjoyed. The technology enabled it, and like it or not, that technology is now a part of their restaurant culture and a part of the dining experience. This same technology is firmly embedded in the museum experience, where text messages help coordination within a seven-floor building, even while the security guards frown in displeasure, and in the hotel experience, where the check-in counter has more screens than people.

Ben Bederson's work embraces technology as inevitable; the work of Karen Renaud and her colleagues suggests we are killing ourselves with email.

What about you, who worked happily for a few hours in a pub on your laptop but rarely touched your mobile phone?

Richard: As we interact here in our magazine's cafe, many thousands await a text message from Barack Obama to be “the first to know” the identity of his running mate. While some smirk at this, I think that says all sorts of positive things about the candidate. But for Barack to include me among the first to know, he might need to send me an email for me to read via my laptop.

My phone sits in my pocket, mostly ignored. Perhaps I have more in common with the restaurant staff and the museum security guards than I might like to admit.

Jon: And so do I. To be completely honest, I despise my cell phone, and not just because the interface is awful. I cringe from how the phone forces a life of haste, and introduces a lack of personal space, and pushes demand to be always in the know.

In a way, I agree with Renaud, and Satchell, and Ling too. I wonder if our focus on a small screen has pushed us to lose sight of the vast periphery and richness of culture?

—Richard Anderson and Jon Kolko