

Paradoxes of Private Information and Change: Possibilities with the mobile (Nepal/India)

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The cellphone is such a singular device! Singular not in its contemporary functionality but in its view and identity. As a device used for communication, it offers a notorious sense of independence, individuality and uniqueness to its user. The fast moving possibilities of the network are aligned to its little sister handsets thereby helping the everyday flux of the human environment interact and develop as it moves ahead. Consider the possibility here of a socialist architecture. A structure that is monolithic, offers a sense of equity and privacy internally but at the same time offers unparalleled opportunity of surveillance. Therefore the object of structure asserts the human to take on the form of an object thanks to its superior hierarchical masters. In this dialectical conversation, in establishing an extension to the cellphone offers a range of interrogative opportunities. Firstly, the mobile as an object plays a role of fixation - a fixation which involves the individual to identify the object as an extension of herself, thereby giving it a sense of instrumentality and operation. The operation being connected to a larger network and opportunities in the virtual network, eases access to be identified, being contacted, communicate with others as positive possibilities and also as subterfuge and silent listening as negative possibilities. Ironically, the central theme of this paragraph takes one back to the debates and fundamental questions of any rational technology open to the commons today. Therefore some of the ethics of such a conversation will not perhaps be too far away from the likes of other medias and common productions/consumptions. Transpositions and regular transitions to facts therefore must clearly be in order.

It was the morning *puja* at the local temple near the hotel I was staying at in Kathmandu, the capital city of the little himalayan nation of Nepal. A decision for a morning stroll had led me to what was a rare spiritual indulgence. In the darkness of the interiors, the smell of the oil lamps and the ringing of the sacred bell by the priest provided the environmental sensibilities of the moment. Out of nowhere, there suddenly burst out a Bollywood ringtone, interrupting what was the early morning spiritual encounter. The priest pauses his *puja* for a

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moment, picks up the phone and tells the caller to call back. It was a typical “Indian” moment - a moment that is severely post-modern but is surrounded by the tranquility of the past. It was most importantly an intrusion - an intrusion to a moment of privacy. A privacy that was being developed due to the spirituality of the moment, a man attempting a possible intimacy with his idea of a higher being and suddenly to disrupt its possibilities, rings the cell-phone. To understand the paradox here is I think central to both issues of telecommunication policy in the region and also of the role and impact of the device in our everyday social realm. As a multi-disciplinary researcher, its a cross-section impossible to ignore.

The Nepali experience in buying a local sim-card can be quite a profound surprise. One might have visited countries that require identification proof for purchase of a sim-card but the requirement of biometrics submissions is a unique one indeed. Nepal is one of the few countries in the world that follows the practice of taking your finger prints in order to purchase a SIM card. NCell is the first and largest private company offering cellular/GSM services in Nepal competing with Nepal Telecom, the state owned company which maintained dominance in the market for a large period of time. Together NCell and Nepal Telecom make for the majority of the market share in the Nepal telecom sector today. The fundamental question here ofcourse is to ask myself - Am I okay with me giving my biometric details to a private telecom company simply to confirm/submit my identity on a purchase of a simple sim card? Is this done in the name of security? in the name of sanctioned surveillance? In the name of centralized information governance? In the name of what illiteracy of freedoms?

The want for greater security and popular surveillance in government and state today against risks on security such as terrorism, cyber-crime, underworld networks have called for the possibility of such intrusions to be legislated and processed by authorities. In most countries today, one requires a proof of identity to buy a sim-card or a local number. Therefore, one may ask if biometrics really is such a pure provocation? Perhaps not in a simplistic sense but the move towards linking basic services and biometrics while many may claim is a step towards security and identification integrity - where do we draw the line. Here, should the private sector be allowed to collect or access such data? In the case of NCell, it is a private sector company operating in the telecom sector, required to collect private biometric data.

The Ministry of the Interior of the Government of Pakistan recently directed the Pakistan Telecommunications Authority to implement a national biometrics system to identify customers of the telecommunications network of the country. A consumer who purchases a SIM in Pakistan will be required to submit his biometric details to the vendor which will be passed on to the National Database

and Registration Authority (Nadra) in Pakistan that will compare identity records stored in the system (Vrankul : 2013). A NADRA spokesperson said “NADRA being the sole custodian of biometrics of over 96 percent total population of the country, has offered the biometric solution in the wake of Interior Ministry’s grave security concerns over the use of cellular devices in terrorist plots” (The Nation : 2013).

Is this a common phenomena in Nepal as well? In 2011, the government of Nepal was planning for a multimillion dollar national ID project which will collect the biometric details of millions indicating thereby a similar strategy involving usage of biometric submission even while purchasing a SIM card (ktmtoday: 2011). According to the Privacy International Report on Nepal, wiretapping is a sensitive issue and the security forces in the past have been known to frequently tap into phones for intelligence often with the help of the telecom companies themselves. Only in June 2010 when the cabinet in Nepal passed a bill which looked into organized crime did it authorized officials to collect information via phone tapping. The privilege however in this instance required for a process to be followed. According to the report, this would have been the first time the government had granted the police the right to intercept phone calls yet there seems to have been a trend of phone tapping far before any relevant legislation had been passed (Privacy International : 2012)

In other recent interesting projects looking into using network data for urban and regional administration, one gets perspectives of how real time data of cellphone networks and usage behaviors can give strategic actionable insights to city administrators and other organizations in consideration. The data from cellular networks are powerful access points in understanding the dynamics of a city. Call Detail Records (CDR) document location and time specific information of phones in the network and are used in the service providers billing and operational processes (Becker 2011). The data can be used in mapping out region - time based activity data and in mapping out other clusters in the information available such as analyzing visitors numbers to a certain city or region. Considering anonymity in play in such projects indicates the usage of such information for positive planning and research. However considering the power of such data, it can have clear usages in the politics of development and the parties interested in utilizing this information in furthering the development and planning project. The users natural process of usage here takes shape into the larger planning process of the monolithic establishment. It offers space for a different kind of ethical surveillance which opens up possibilities for the user to unconsciously and anonymously participate in the system - where the system tracks groups and not the individual (oh privacy!). After all is it not true that privacy only becomes an issue when the individual is disturbed? Only when awareness and

provocation takes place simultaneously does privacy become an issue? Does the point of being listened to offer an intrinsic value otherwise?

Private telecommunications operators in several states have been known to act as instruments of the state both in policy and the mechanics of influence and this is common behavior in the industry globally. In an interesting parallel note the Guardian reports on the NSA “This week, cellphone carriers publicly reported that US law enforcement made an astounding 1.3m demands for customer text messages, caller locations and other information last year” (Cindy : 2012)

In a way this entire conversation is surrounded by the idea of transparencies, indicating different layers of transparency, thereby indicating opportunities between opaque and complete transparency - in between which exists translucence. As Zizek notes in the *Plague of Fantasies* “..that is to say, the screen of the interface was supposed to allow the user direct access to the machine behind the screen; the user was supposed to ‘grasp’ its workings - in ideal conditions, even to reconstruct it rationally” (Zizek : 1997) remarking on Turkle’s note on the move “from the modernist culture of calculation to the postmodernist culture of stimulation” (Turkle : 1995). The individual here throws himself to this postmodern cultural phenomena and accepts the fluid way by which these changes take place. In this process, one fails to recognize the occurrences or sometimes even the moments of disturbance that he in reality experiences with the technology he considers fundamental today. As a part of this broader phenomena, there are several other collateral products that comprise of the eco-system the user interacts with as part of his experience with the mobile. These products further integrate him with the market and most importantly makes him a willing participant in the open dissemination of private data and information to the widely connected systems ecology of the network. Here one cannot easily differentiate activities on cyberspace and on cellphone networks as they are co-existing modalities and share fundamental elements of the phenomena.

Yet, the other layer here is on the issue of surveillance. In the German film “The life of others” we are presented with a dialectics of listening and speaking where the wall becomes the interface of that conversation. The other point here is ofcourse of awareness - are we aware that we are being listened to? Perhaps yes, and therefore in this realm of suspicion there is always a sense of fear. What therefore happens when the fear becomes so common that it transforms from fear to familiarity? Better still, what if we become willing subjects of open disclosure where our technologies let out snippets willed by us as foot-steps of the directions we take? In *Person of Interest*, a recent television series involving a socially invisible billionaire genius who had

invented a master surveillance intelligence machine integrating the complete information channels of New York City for the government to prevent acts of terrorism leverages on a loop hole he creates in the system to predict acts of crime and prevent them personally. While the television program here taps into a range of positive yet controversial intentions, this brings me to the next fear I'm talking about - the fear not of state surveillance (the one you get used to) but of third-party intrusions and technological attacks for intelligence by individuals and concerns of individuals.

Let's me here bring in an unforgivable re-invocation of Rumsfeld's notorious "unknown unknown's" where he goes - "There are known knowns; there are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns; that is to say, there are things that we now know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns - there are things we do not know we don't know". Let's not forget here Zizek's extension of a fourth "unknown knowns" (Zizek 2006). This in many ways is what the discussion here is about but in a realm different to the context the above occurred, here where I discuss information, privacy, public-private issues of-course. The network gives rise to a range of interactions with the paradox with all of its stakeholders - the users, the administrators and the market. All in all, its structuring, openness and usage by its controllers have wide scale impacts.

I remember Airtel, one of India's leading telecommunications company back when smartphones were not in the market, offered an entertainment service that one could access with an ordinary mobile phone. The service used to be driven by basic sms and an anonymous chat service used to be a part of that service. A customer indulging with a handset for the first time even in its most basic mode could access the indulgence of chatting with a stranger. Today, Airtel runs a similar portal called Airtel Live which is a much larger platform accessible over most categories of cellphones. Someone who has never used a computer in his lifetime now get to activate the latest ringtones on his phones and downloads games over the cellular network. Imagine the possibilities that open up in the 'unconnected economy', rural participants on the other side of the divide. The phone as a networked device opens up a range of capitalist opportunities both as a consumer and a seller. Din't the Boston Consulting Group after all kick off as a one-man, one-telephone consultancy? It is common these days for tele-marketers in India to buy or by other means acquire formally and informally (ad-hoc) list of telephone numbers from a variety of sources ranging from registers maintained by security in large office buildings to online retail stores to classifieds. This acquisition obviously leads to sales pitches and a range of intrusions - perhaps the priest in the above paragraphs was called on by a tele-marketer? Sometimes the consumer buys into this by accepting the

small print and for the other times, not really but the practice seems to take place anyway. Nothing as sweet as a cold call eh?

You know, in Kashmir in India, pre-paid cellular connections don't work, in other words, they are not authorized for the area and the network rejects your sim once you enter the region. To enter Kashmir and use one's cellphone, one goes through a submissive act of buying into the postpaid package. The postpaid unlike the prepaid offers a greater level of identity integrity of the user as bills are sent the users residence and the registration requires a document of identity and proof of residence address. A purchase of a prepaid sim-card does require proof of identity as well but the postpaid package is considered to hold a superior status in comparison. This submissive act of buying in thereby lets you the honorable privilege of using your cellphone in a highly securitized space - a space that is not normal and that sanctions greater surveillance and subterfuge possibilities. Therefore the politics of possibilities in the context of this paper can also be determined by the politics and government of space. A highly open and free market driven space encourages greater willing sharing and influences by the market on the consumer. A fragile system encourages elements of power in the system to assert and compete for surveillance possibilities. A system where the state is stronger than everybody else encourages only but the state to assert such power and responsibility. And finally, a dynamic system that allows for dynamic possibilities.

The mobile spectrum in India is a commodity that is sold to the highest bidder. As a private investor, you buy into the spectrum to compete in the telecommunications sector in the country. As a radical proposition, some here propose to treat the spectrum as a public utility where everyone can equally tap into the utility for a fee and thereby increase opportunities, economy and reduce cost (Ponappa 2011). Let me also here present the possibility of an 'Aurovillian' imagination - looking into the fantasy of a network of equity driven socialism, direct democracy and no ownership. While a part of it looks friendly, the imagination also however indicates that no matter what your ownership of your domain stands for - the state will no matter if it deems to, can and will intrude if it intends to - in the matter of privacy. The problem here when going beyond the state, brings into question the role and impact of the private sector in the system. The private sector seems to also have taken a central role in the 'integrationist' project with the cellular system. With the introduction of Near Field Communications (NFC) which uses RFID technology identifies one's identity/bank account details with the computer and sets a match (Carter : 2013). You don't need credit cards anymore! Sigh, you don't even need printed boarding passes any more - they're all on the phone. Putting the sense of excitement aside, the remarkable realization here is the central mass surveillance ability created because

of this tech driven integrationist project of services with the mobile. In India, you now need your cell-phone in booking a railway ticket over the internet. For verification purposes and a greater level of security, the administration mandates cell-phone based verification for a simple train ticket purchase. The National Unique Identification project that India has recently undertaken aims in the coming years to document and establish identity numbers backed with biometric data for millions. The project also offers an opportunity for information across platforms to be tagged, for example with bank account numbers, ration card details, driving license details. It offer a centralized prospective providing authentication and integrity of identity. While the infrastructure of such a system will have to be remarkably secure and strong, it brings the individual, the family and larger spectrum of society to be inescapable from the influence of the state. For a country such as India, this being a monolithic endeavor also offers potential beyond that of a regular imagination. Its grasp can offer great monitoring capacities? While the benefits of such a system cannot currently be ignored, how are the ethical questions of such a project being engaged?

There are however a range of equalizing effects taking place from a consumer perspective well within rural participants and low income groups. While, the true impact of these technologies is largely speculation and in these areas is still an uncertain debate, there have been several proven benefits. In India, Information systems via the mobile phone help fishermen understand demand, price etc and respond in reducing wastage, time and optimize resources in gaining better value (Abraham 2008). Such technologies are also being used for farmers extensively (Vark 2012) in determining prices, weather conditions etc. Some projects have shown that the impact has not been as significant as expected (Fafchamps: 2012) With the gradual growth of the penetration rate of the mobile phone in rural areas and lower income group areas in India, these access points might make a small difference whichever way they can. The mobile has had a powerful role in integrating these players to the realities of the market and this is true across segments. The Government has been aggressively working towards developing its E-Governance systems and strategies. For the government, e-governance produces numerous service delivery opportunities and and creates greater spaces for navigation in planning. The role of it however cannot be misplaced like it very often is with more fundamental things.

The dilemmas here are several and there are clear lines for the placement of interested paradoxes. Like the old joke Zizek often cracks about the soldier being ordered to voluntarily sign an oath, the issues here bring in light some of the shadows shed by subversive forces in play along with the larger economies and their interests. Its also a decisional challenge of selecting the right amount of

translucence - from layer to layer. The flows of this larger project will therefore have consequences beyond the subliminal aesthetics of privacy but will in process define the structural procedure involved in related activities and submissions transforming largely what are the unknown knows of today to the known knows of tomorrow.

Notes

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