Social proximity in the network society: online and offline boundaries in a corporate community

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Abstract

The introduction of wireless internet and the smartphone made a lot of new communication channels available to many people (e.g. Skype, Whatsapp, Google Chat, Twitter or Facebook) . Communication technologies offer on the one hand many opportunities to stay always connected; but on the other hand they are an equally important instrument in regulating, organizing and shutting off social connections. What role do communication technologies have in the creation of social proximity within a corporate community? To answer this question, the article is based on qualitative research within a group of young techsavvy people, who are working together in a corporation called SETUP. The goal of this fieldwork was to gain in-depth insights in the way young techsavvy people relate to newly offered opportunities to structure their online and offline social environment. They, each in their own way, struggle with defining social boundaries between 'them' and 'the other', between a 'colleague' and a 'friend' or between 'us' and 'them'. Communication technologies are additional tools to ensure these ever existing privacy boundaries are maintained in new ways beyond borders of online and offline.

Keywords: business anthropology, SETUP, network society, privacy, communication technology, social proximity

Do I know you?

Dear reader, how would you like to keep in touch? We don't see each other very often any more. That is not a problem, we are busy of course. Maybe we will send a little Whatsapp, or are we already friends on Facebook? You don't have Facebook you say? Okay, can we still send old-fashioned text messages, but not too often, or maybe not after six o'clock in the evening? We are colleagues after all. What do you think of a Skype session, or is Skype only intended for close friends? Would you like a long discussion, with for each argument a new email? Shall I tell you about my new relationship on Google chat?

Technology gives us new ways to connect and disconnect with our close friends, our acquaintances and even the strangers we do not know yet. We have got new tools at hand to define and redefine the boundaries of these social networks. For the most of us, our phones, computers or smartphones help to organize and structure our social environment the way we want. New communication channels are a constant challenge to the shifting social boundaries. What do we need, and what do we want with all these possibilities, with this intensification of our (social) networks? Can I still be myself, how can I manage my image? Do I have the right tools and knowledge to represent myself the way I want?

With a critical eye, I submerged in the lives of a group of young techsavvy people who are working together in a corporation called SETUP. This is a small so-called 'medialab': a place where innovative technology, new ideas and creative concepts are being created, questioned and made (SETUP, 2012a). SETUP is mainly running on freelancers and volunteers in the center of Utrecht, The Netherlands. For three months I did my research here to grasp the meaning these people give to their social surroundings, each with their own vision on different social contexts, and each with a unique way to deal with the digital communication tools that are available. During this time I became part of the company as a resident researcher to be able to write this descriptive article from

a meaningful point of view for the SETUP-ers. This research from within SETUP is mainly based on participatory observation with additional in-depth interviews.

The main question to start this article with is a question that motivated me for months and months in the constant development of this research. What role do communication technologies, with all the possibilities and impossibilities they have to offer, have in the creation of social proximity within SETUP as a community? With social proximity being a label used to define different kinds of relationships. Categories broadly range from a good friend to a neighbor, from my mother to an acquaintance. The goal of this research was to gain in-depth insights in the way young techsavvy people relate to newly offered opportunities to structure their online and offline social environment.

The meaning technology has differs from person to person, since everyone has their own way to give communication technology a place in live, therefore the meaning communication technology has for the group of SETUP-ers is is not static and essential, but pluriform and always subject to change. When we have a closer look, there are four layers of meaning to be distinguished. In this article, the role of communication technology is divided into four different roles: practical, symbolic, organizing and regulating. Each role has its own empirical chapter, and therefore the structure of this paper will be as follows.

At first the theoretical framework discusses the key concepts in this article: communication technology, social proximity, and the underlying conceptual process, privacy. What follows is the methodology of the research and a brief description of SETUP as a social and corporate organization. Next there are four empirical chapters: “SETUP in the cloud” discusses the practical role of communication technology in the flow of work. “Do you speak SETUP” describes the typical SETUP language and humor, which underlines the symbolic importance of technology. Then, a brief interlude follows, “The system and the user” invites the reader to have a closer look at the organizing power technology has. The final chapter “New tools, ancient boundaries” is about individuals using the digital tools they have to regulate social boundaries.

Theoretical framework

Communication technology is the first comprehensive concept that needs a little introduction before starting the empirical chapters. Since the introduction of the world wide web (www) in 1991 there has been a rapid intensification of digital information networks. The introduction of wireless internet and the smartphone brought a lot of new communication channels (like Skype, Whatsapp, Google Chat, Twitter or Facebook) available to many people. In this article, these are all considered 'communication technologies', as they all allow us to exchange (social) information without being in the same physical place. The concept 'communication technologies' includes both hardware (e.g. smartphone or laptop) and software (such as the above) that facilitate communication. These technologies facilitate more and more options to structure our social interactions with the people around us. There is more room for initiative because there are more choices to be made than in the pre-internet era. How would you like to be in touch with your family, friends and colleagues? Are you going to 'befriend' your mother on Facebook, or is calling more appropriate? Is emailing suitable for discussing more sensitive topics, or is it to indirect and tedious?

Organizing your social surroundings is to relate to the people around you in different social contexts. This is a process that is constantly subject to change and is called 'the privacy process'. Privacy is a complex concept with many connotations which changed often throughout the historical use of the word (cf. Hoek, 2011, n.p.). Its definition as used in this article was written by Irwin Altman and Walter R. Gove. They describe privacy as an inter-personal boundary regulation. Every individual levels the amount and form of interaction with their social environment (Altman & Gove, 1978, p. 10). Altman & Gove stress that social interaction has an optimum curve: everyone has an own comfortable degree of personal involvement. They argue that too much or too little social stimulation has consequences on the functioning of the individual (ibid, pp. 10-14). 'Inter-

personal' indicates that it is a mutual process that takes place between people. In defining these social boundaries one constantly redefines social distance.

Where privacy is the process of regulation the inter-personal boundaries, social proximity is the label produced when asked to define a specific social relationship. These labels can be based on a specific social context ('family', 'colleagues', 'a friend from highschool') or distance (varying from 'a soulmate' to 'an acquaintance'). But most of the time one needs more words to define a social relationship, for the meaning of labels is not fixed but pluriform and ambiguous, and they will always fail to give a fully adequate interpretation. For instance, besides the fact that SETUP-ers are bound by a company and are therefore 'colleagues', most of them experience a more complex social relationship. When I asked them to define the social relationship they had with fellow SETUP-ers, most of them had a hard time describing it. Dongwei replied: “all of them are people who could be friends”, Frank-Jan used the term 'roommates' and Lara answered: “SETUP-ers are more like classmates to me, I see them a lot, and it would be possible to build a friendship with most of them, but it feels still a bridge to far to actually invite them at home”. Social proximity is thus the answer to the question 'how do you know each other?', or 'who is this person to you?'. It is a descriptive label that interprets the gray area in which social relationships are formed.

Methodology

Typical to anthropology, the main methodology used is participatory observation. In this qualitative research method, the researcher will try to adopt the way informants (research subjects) give meaning to their lives. This research technique tries to describe useful in-depth insights into the meaning people give to their social surroundings (Boeije, 2009, p. 11). It tries to explain the perspective of the SETUP-ers where possible.

For three months I was 'going native' in the SETUP company. For about eight hours a day, five days a week I found myself where other SETUP-ers would be. This was mainly at the office, but also at the various sites where events were held. In the office I had a chair of my own at the big table; this was a good spot to listen to and talk along with the ongoing conversations. I wrote notes in a small booklet or directly on my laptop, and when it was quieter I had time to discretely process the notes on my laptop to avoid SETUP-ers feeling observed (the Hawkthorne effect). I processed the more sensitive information at home.

To analyze and process qualitative data I used the program Nvivo to help me code and structure the information I gathered in nodes. I started open coding, exploring and naming each point of interest with a new code. As the fieldwork progressed, I tried out axial coding to see if the I could place the different codes in relation to each other. I wrote the different subjects I coded so far on a poster at home to find a way to organize them. At the same time I formulated hypotheses to verify the relationships between the network of nodes. At last I decided which nodes to erase, which to split and which to keep. During the fieldwork I constantly reformulated the possible hypotheses, whereby I alternated between data collection, and the formulation and testing of hypotheses.

In addition to the participatory observation, I scheduled three to five unstructured interviews a week. I took one of the informants apart, and we went to one of the nearest coffee shops for a drink. Here, we had the privacy to discuss the subjects I prepared on a list. These subjects were constantly changing, as when the research progressed, points of interest changed as well. Thus, I interviewed most of the SETUP-ers multiple times with various subjects in mind. Often I had a couple of hypotheses which I tried to evaluate, sometimes I offered the hypothesis directly, but most of the time I gathered information to validate or rectify the hypothesis.

In anthropological research, validity and reliability have to be adapted to the nature of qualitative research (Boeije, 2009, Chapter 6). Because all interviews were unstructured and non-reoccurring, the reliability was specifically dependent on repetitive events (like daily lunches and weekly gatherings) and research triangulation (to verify data with multiple research techniques). Verification or rectification of hypotheses was done using data gathered in both participatory observation and in-depth interviews. The internal validity is the coherence between the different

concepts (Boeije, 2009, p. 170). To stimulate the internal validity I presented the main hypotheses to Frank-Jan in the last phase of the research. After his confirmation, I made a powerpoint presentation with the main findings for direct feedback as a member check. Although the small amount of people researched is typical for qualitative research, the major flaw of this research is the fact that the external validity is restricted to this specific situation.

SETUP: the organization

Although business anthropology is still an infant within cultural anthropology, many anthropologists within the so-called 'organizational anthropology' or 'corporate anthropology' emphasize the importance of anthropological research within the business context (Marrewijk, 2010; Chapman, 2004; Jordan, 2010; Lilis & Guan Tian, 2010). Fortunately, enough research has been done to have a closer look at 'the corporation' from a anthropological perspective. A corporation is a goal-oriented body, that has to deliver a collective product. A business community is hereby primarily bound by this shared objective. But a company also structures a social organization in which social relationships are being formed (Lilis & Guang Tian, 2010, p. 104). Every business has its own social norms and values of importance, and therefore each corporation has its own corporate culture. Before we can continue, here will be a brief description of SETUP and its history.

SETUP was started by six entrepreneurs in 2011. They had the idea to create a platform to try new technologies. This became one of the few 'media labs' in the Netherlands. SETUP organizes and facilitates meetings and events in a great variety of form and content. Their vision evolved to form a “new stage for creation and innovation of digital media” (SETUP, 2011). Examples of their events include a lecture of a media-critical scientist, the collaborative testing of sleep applications on mobile devices, and bringing a cardboard 'Facebook Timeline' to the Dutch festival “De Beschaving” [“The civilization”] (SETUP, 2012b).

Many bigger companies obtain a firm hierarchical structure, which directly influences the way social relationships are being formed. These corporate cultures are often based on hierarchical differences, on power relations (cf. Campbell & Craig, 2008, pp. 478-491). However, within SETUP there is little room for hierarchical differences. As stated in their policy: “SETUP is a small flat organization, that operates from one office”. Later on, SETUP is called a “matrix organization”, which means everyone has their own role and responsibility, but no one is practically in charge over others.

When I did my research, SETUP consisted of a nine freelancers, each with their own contract for two to three days a week. In addition, Lara and Hans (the two trainees) and myself (as a resident researcher) were to be found in the SETUP office daily. Lara helped preparing the events, Hans was a video and website production intern, and I regularly did some little production tasks myself. Among the freelancers, Anke and Krista have been educated in the arts and cultural sector. Lex has a background as an archivist and programmer, just like Juriaan, whose major skill was web development. Thomas has a degree in theater and storytelling, Tijmen was a lecturer at the HVA in interface design, Rens was a psychology undergraduate, who started his own research at the Rathenau Institute. And last but not least, Dongwei and Tom are both directly involved in the master New Media and Digital Technology, Dongwei as a student and Tom as a lecturer.

In short, SETUP is a two years old media laboratory which creates and facilitates events and meetings to stimulate the public creation and innovation of digital media. With a dozen of freelancers with varying backgrounds and three people doing an internship, SETUP is a small dynamic organization which is proud to lack major hierarchical differences.

Next chapter is the first of the chapters based on empirical data. This chapter starts with an impression of SETUP's office and from there on it describes the important practical role of communication technology.

Empirical chapters

1. SETUP in the cloud

I hear a dense noise of keystrokes and the soft clicking of computer mice, combined with the constant hum of computer fans, like the sound of a relaxing fountain. Paper is being folded, a phone vibrates, little creaks of a scroll wheel and mice that slide across the table. Earplugs in, headphones on, each their own laptop on the big table, all connected to one of the power points.

In the middle of the office, which is about four by seven meters, is a large table. The table is actually made of four doors that lie horizontally on trestles. Here and there are some power sockets and in the middle of the table is a router with lights that constantly flicker. In the corner of the table is a small computer with a monitor. When you enter the office there is a big paper agenda hanging on the wall “where you can still enjoy analog writing and tearing” stating the upcoming events in colorful post-its.

The first day in office, I received the 'key' to access the Dropbox, SETUP's “digital archive closet”. All the produced files are stored on this online server, divided into different folders. But this is not the only way SETUP-ers work and communicate online. Later on I found out the flow of work is actually spread over many so-called platforms, these are online services that facilitate the exchange of (social) information. Just to name a few: Dropbox, Facebook, Twitter, Roundcube, Highrise, Basecamp, Piratepad, Etherpad and Workflowy. To fully understand the flow of work within SETUP, you should familiarize yourself with all of these platforms.

This way of working is typical for the workflow within SETUP. The term 'workflow' was opted by Olson and Olson, who wrote about the workflow system: all (communication) instruments that contribute to the way work is organized (Olson & Olson, 2008, p. 551), for instance all the platforms above. The fact that all these computer files are stored online, makes that they are in 'the cloud' (Vaquero et al., 2009, pp. 54-55). This central server is always accessible to everyone from SETUP, anywhere and anytime – if they have a device connected to the internet of course. So the practical role of communication technology is to facilitate the workflow, which is spread over many platforms in the cloud. This organization of the flow of work is thus typical for SETUP.

The cloud is a good example of an organizational network facilitated by information and communication technology. The workflow within SETUP is not bound to space nor time. People don't have to go to the office to be able to work, they can work on the couch at home of in a café if they prefer. Neither do they have to work from nine to five, instead they can manage their working time as they like. The office is not open on default hours anyway, many people only attend in the afternoon, and some work till late at night. In short, working in the cloud brings many opportunities and makes the workflow more flexible compared to traditional office work.

2. Do you speak SETUP?

Writing about 'SETUP-ers' implies that the group I joined is defined by the fact that they all work for SETUP. But there is more, SETUP is also a social community, they share more than just the the fact that they happen to work for SETUP. They share certain values and ideas which Frank-Jan calls 'common interest'.

Everyone seems to have their own ideas and opinion about recent technological developments. Opinions often clash on the work-floor and motivate common discussions like: 'should we use open-source software', 'should we put our precious time in Highrise or Basecamp' and 'should we find an alternative for Dropbox?' On the individual scale, these different opinions become almost like a statement: Hans does not use a smartphone, Tijmen is pro open-source, Tom promotes project management software like Highrise and Basecamp, which are not open-source and Juriaan is strictly anti-Apple (“it is almost sectarian”).

But the fact they have an opinion about these technological subjects, and take the effort to discuss their own point of view indicates one major point: these are shared topics of interest. With ongoing conversations and discussions about new communication technologies they are mutually negotiating meaning. The discussions reflect the importance of communication technology as a

shared common interest. It defines what it means to be part of SETUP. Thus, the role communication technology is playing is not limited to the facilitation of the workflow in the cloud, it is of symbolic importance to SETUP.

The symbolic role of communication technology is also embodied by the specific language and humor used by SETUP-ers. When I started my research, it was very hard to understand every word that was being said. It was hard for me because the language that is spoken is stuck somewhere between English and Dutch, and moreover filled with abbreviations. The events being organized were called 'bit' and 'byte' events, a direct reference to bits and bytes as digital units, whereby a bit event is smaller, and a byte event is larger. Words like 'interface', 'datascrapen' 'awkward cricket', 'retweet', 'hashtag' and 'black box' were frequently used, and everyone seemed to understand the meaning of these English words.

In one of my field notes, after two weeks with SETUP, I wrote: “I feel I am still not able to speak their language although we all speak Dutch.” I tried to pave myself a way through the flood of words, and after six weeks I began to see the importance of this shared language. I registered all the words I did not understand and looked for their meaning online. Most words seemed to be direct references to popular movies (Inception), games (like Angry Birds), ICT products (such as Facebook and Twitter), series (like Family Guy and Southpark) and memes. A meme is “a contagious information pattern” (SETUP, 2012c), usually an online image or movie that has been used and reused, until it has a life of its own. I would like to summarize these categories to digital culture, or in Tijmen's words “internet culture and intangible heritage”.

As in the language, is was hard for me to grasp the references that made humor actually funny. When I made my first joke that made many people laugh (Lara, Ivo, Hans and Dongwei), it made me think about the role that humor plays in being a part of SETUP. After so many jokes I did not really get, making a joke that caught on felt like a huge confirmation to me. The joke went like this: Hans told the initials of his names were two C's. As a joke I a answered “is that supposed to stand for Creative Commence?”. A big laughter followed. Apparently this was a reference to digital culture everyone was familiar with. Hans replied with a bashful “yes” and a new burst of laughter filled the air when Lara asked “not really right?”

In my interviews with different people, I found out others recognize the initial difficulties with the SETUP humor. Hans, who started his internship the same period I started my research, wrote in an evaluation that the humor was difficult to grasp for him as well. Lara said she did not dare to make jokes in the beginning, a feeling I surely recognized. Krista, one of the freelancers, explains her own vision: “I understood the humor only eventually, you really need the time to kind of grow into this humor. But now I understand the jokes better, because I know where they come from”. Being able to make jokes and laugh about other jokes is very important in the feeling of belonging to the social SETUP group. For full inclusion it is essential to learn to understand the humor and for some of us that simply means they have to bite the bullet.

Just like understanding the language, participating in the humor depends on the right references. The words and jokes refer to the earlier called 'shared interests'. Hereby communication technology, as a part of the comprehensive digital culture, is what Eriksen calls a 'common denominator', a shared knowledge with a strong symbolic value to a social community (Eriksen,2002, p. 13). Because I would like to emphasize the symbolic value of this shared knowledge, I would like to opt to use the term 'symbolic knowledge'. In using this shared symbolic knowledge SETUP-ers confirm their social relationship and social identity. This mutual recognition (Eriksen, 2002, p. 28) is done in a language and a humor that is typical to the social SETUP community. If you do not get the jokes and can not talk the talk, you will drop out one way or another.

The importance of the symbolic role of communication technology as part of the bigger digital culture is underlined by the importance of symbolic knowledge the language and humor refers to. Language and humor strongly confirm the feeling of belonging to the SETUP community and therefore they will connect and divide.

Before introducing the last chapter, the organizing role of communication technology needs to be explained for it gives an insight into the agency technology has. In contrast, the last chapter shows the agency SETUP-ers have using these technologies to regulate their social environment.

3. The system and the user

Can I invite you to have a peek behind the doors of technology? Information and communication technologies are of central importance in this article and that is why we should have a closer look. Technology is not just some electronics in a plastic sleeve, it is not just a tool we use as a little shovel in a sandbox. Technology offers new opportunities, but it also constantly redefines the boundaries between the possible and the impossible.

New communication technologies structure the way we think about communication and it pushes us into a new mindset. An illustration of this mindset is that, at time of writing, my girlfriend was studying in Australia. When planning our contact, we naturally took into account the possibilities communication technologies have to offer us. We were already framed into the new mindset. On the other hand, we would never consider being physically in two places at once, as we know this is impossible. Technology is thus not a passive instrument: by marking the boundary between the possible and the impossible, it structures our mindset.

Sometimes there is an incongruence between the idea the user has and the structure technology pushes the user in. When these tensions occur, the structuring agency of technology is exposed. One example occurred with one of the many so-called social networking sites, Facebook. This is a major online service that facilitates communication in social networks. Bjorn, a professional programmer, gets very irritated by Facebook: “the Facebook profile is a major problem to me, everything is being so parameterized”. And this includes more than just demographical data. Software and hardware systems tend to quantify human information to make it useful. When filling out demographic data on the Facebook profile, one must choose between 'male' or 'female' (an extension of the dominant gender paradigm) and the system generally forces everyone to make a choice between these categories before one can even continue.

Although this example is focused on Facebook, the described incongruence occurred in the use of the many different platforms: in the flow of work, it often happens that more than one person wants to work in the same file. When the file is archived in Dropbox, it is accessible to everyone, but it can only be edited by one person at a time. Consequentially we had to move to another platform to work with multiple users in one document. With Google Docs this is possible, but not every SETUP-er had the mandatory Google Account to log in. And two last examples: in one application Dongwei was connected to one of his Facebook friends, even though he did not agree for this to happen. And Tom had a problem with the collapse of the boundaries between different social contexts (we will come back to that later).

In a conversation, Frank- Jan introduced me the term 'affordance': the idea that material things can invite. We are not aware that possibilities technology offers are at the same time limited by the offered structure. In the software program Photoshop, for instance, it is very hard to think out of the system that is offered”. This was indeed the kind of terminology I was looking for. Theoretical research showed that 'affordance' was coined by the American psychologist James Jerome Gibson. He noted that the physical environment indicated the limitation of possibilities, but still people can make their own choices (cf. Gibson, 1986, p. 143).

To extrapolate the term affordance and apply it to technology, the usability engineer Donald Norman wrote a more useful definition: "affordance are the perceived and actual properties of the thing, primarily those fundamental properties that determine just how the thing could possibly be used" (Norman, 2002, 9). In this version, affordance is an essential part of the object. But this definition is easily criticized, for one can argue that technology, as the man-made object, has no agency at all. This argument refers to the 'agency versus structure' debate, a discussion I will briefly describe.

At the two ends of the spectrum of the agency debate there is social constructivism and technological determinism. From the social constructivist's point of view, technology is only a man-made product without any capacity to act. It focuses on design (we make technology). On the other hand, technological determinism assumes that all major changes in society take place because of technological developments (the Arab spring was ignited by Twitter; cf. De Mul, 2002, pp. 29-33). Jos de Mul, a technology-philosopher, puts the discussion this way: according to the instrumental understanding, "technology is a neutral and value-free tool used for different purposes. In contrast, the substantial understanding states that technological artifacts can never be neutral because they always have specific characteristics" (De Mul, 2002, p. 30, own translation).

De Mul suggests 'technologisch interactionisme' ['technologic interactionism']: "an approach that seeks to avoid the problems both determinism and constructivism have, by assuming a constant interaction and mutual influences of heterogeneous factors". During my research I became more aware of the influence communication technologies have by the incongruence described above. SETUP-ers have the capacity to act, but technology certainly influences the way they think and act by the structure it offers.

ICT offers new tools to structure and organize our social contacts, but it forces us to do this in certain ways. The agency technology has lies in the possibilities it offers: it provides a new social structure and at the same time determines our way of thinking, but this does not always fit with our own ideas. The ideas we have ourselves show the agency from a human perspective. Communication technology is therefore not a passive, neutral thing, but has a clearly organizing role.

On the other side of the same coin, the last chapter describes how SETUP-ers deal with communication technologies to regulate their social surroundings. It focuses on the regulative role of communication technology as a tool in the inter-personal boundary regulation process.

4. New tools, ancient boundaries

A message was shared by Lara, Ivo Thom and myself containing a Dutch translation of the Polish manifesto "We, the web kids", a piece written by Piotr Czersky. The manifesto shows a critical view on 'the internet' as a concept.

> We grew up with the Internet and on the Internet. This is what makes us different; this is what makes the crucial, although surprising […] difference: we do not 'surf' and the internet to us is not a 'place' or 'virtual space'. The Internet to us is not something external to reality but a part of it: an invisible yet constantly present layer intertwined with the physical environment. We do not use the Internet, we live on the Internet and along it (Czerski, 2012).

After reading this manifesto, Frank-Jan had goosebumps, and Lara almost started to cry because both of them recognized their own perspective. The four of us briefly discussed this writing, and this described changing perspective on 'the internet' appeared to be a shared point of view.

To SETUP-ers, 'the Internet' is not an external space nor is it an essential monolithic thing. Instead it seems a more pluriform network which is completely interwoven with their daily social lives. It was remarkable to see to which extent the way they communicate online is consistent with the impression they make face-to-face. For instance: Lara uses a lot of exclamation points, an extension of her active and jumpy character; Dongwei, "the guy you see everywhere", has more than 600 friends on Facebook; time pressured Tijmen usually takes three weeks to reply to an email; and Tom neatly recontextualizes his social contexts online: "friends, intimates and family […], I really try to keep these groups separated". In short, the impression SETUP-ers make online is an extension of their offline performance.

Marshall McLuhan, a famous media scholar, argues in "Understanding Media" that technology is an extension of our body (McLuhan, 2001, pp. 5-8). Since online and offline are completely interconnected, this point of view does more justice to the way SETUP-ers experience technology and their social surroundings, than the separate approach of man and technology. There is no hard distinction between the regulation of social contact offline through attitudes, gestures and

word choices, and the regulation of online social contact through platform choice, recontextualization, accessibility et cetera.

In line with McLuhans statement, new communication technologies are additional tools used in the inter-personal boundary regulation process. Defining social borders is of all times, but with new technologies there are new tools at hand to organize the social surroundings. I have seen many SETUP-ers using the broad scope of technologies in shaping their privacy. For instance, when I asked Tijmen "will your phone not notify you of new email?" he replied:

> no, that would really make me mad. Since some chocolate has melted into the loudspeaker of my phone, I do not always hear the ringtone. But I love it, I will just call back later. People should not expect from me that I always respond immediately.

Instead of connection, Tijmen uses the fact that his speaker does not work to actually disconnect.

I have found other examples of SETUP-ers using technology to draw social limits in the endless possibilities it offers. By making a choice which communication technology to use or not to use, you regulate contact as well. Frank-Jan, Bjorn and Tijmen deliberately choose not to be disturbed by any notifications, and only check their email, Twitter and Facebook accounts when it suits them. Thomas does not like social media at all, and only uses a limited number of platforms. Tijmen allows only his "real friends" on Facebook, and invites all others to connect on Linkedin. And Tom, who keeps his different social contexts separated offline, recontextualizes all these groups online.

Communication technologies offer on the one hand many opportunities to always stay connected; but on the other hand they are an equally important instrument in regulating, organizing and shutting off social connections. They are additional tools to ensure ever existing privacy boundaries are maintained in new ways. And in this boundary regulatory process, the online performance is a natural extension of ones offline identity, for online and offline are completely intertwined in the lives of SETUP-ers.

Conclusion

The goal of this research was to gain in-depth insights in the way young techsavvy people relate to newly offered opportunities to structure their online and offline social environment. Because of the small number of informants (seventeen only) the external validity of this research only accounts for this specific situation; the SETUP community is not a representative sample of techsavvy people. Nevertheless, the in-depth information describes certain societal issues which are widely spread. All of us have to deal with communication technologies and the possibilities they offer, and this research shows a good example of how young techsavvy people incorporate communication technology in their everyday lives.

What role do communication technologies, with all the possibilities and impossibilities they offer, have in the creation of social proximity within SETUP as a community? This was the question I kept asking myself during the three months of participatory observation within SETUP. I got many answers, answers of which I sometimes wondered how they related to the question, answers that forced me to think outside of my own framework, to search for new theories and ideas that would explain the data I was gathering. The meaning communication technology has for the group of SETUP-ers is pluriform, with four layers of meaning to be distinguished. In this conclusion, the practical, symbolic, organizing and regulating role of technology are shortly described, after which an integrated vision of the way SETUP-ers give meaning to communication technology is presented.

The first role is a very practical one: communication technology connects SETUP-ers in the cloud, it facilitates work and non-work related contact through the various online platforms used. SETUP-ers can work where they want and when they want, for these platforms facilitate a workflow little bound to space or time.

The second role of communication technologies is a bit more difficult to grasp as it is a symbolic one. Communication technologies are part of the "internet culture and intangible

heritage", like popular movies, games, social media, series and memes. They are shared points of interests that connect the SETUP-ers. Negotiating the meaning of this shared knowledge is a mutual confirmation of their social identity. This symbolic role of communication technologies for the community is even underlined by the specific language and humor that have evolved from it. The constant references to the digital culture strongly confirm the feeling of belonging and therefore it will connect and divide.

Communication technology has, thirdly, an organizing role as it gives us the opportunity to stay always connected in different ways. On the one hand it offers possibilities to structure and organize our social surroundings, but on the other hand it forces us to do this in a certain manner. It is providing a new social structure.

Lastly, communication technologies fulfill a regulatory role. They offer us the option to be always reachable, but are an equally important instrument in regulating and shutting off social connections. Communication technology is thus an additional tool to ensure the maintenance of ever existing privacy boundaries.

The integrated vision of the way SETUP-ers give meaning to communication technology is that of an extension which offers them new tools to relate to their social surroundings, to balance between connection and disconnection, to organize different social contexts and level the amount of intimacy. It is an extension in the sense that the inter-personal regulation process goes beyond the borders of online and offline: social performances (face-to-face as well as technologically mediated) are a coherent social and cultural identity.

As a conclusion I would like to argue that people and technology cannot be researched separately. Instead, an overarching vision allows us to have more in-depth insights in the tension between technology, with all opportunities it offers, and man, as a social being that uses these technologies to organize and level his social boundaries.

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