

THE INSTANTANEOUS TIME

How being connected affect the notion of time

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Time, and how time is conceived has been a central issue in a number of scientific fields, ranging from physics to philosophy - and probably most fields between. The perspectives presented in this paper are based on methods and theories from what probably could be called “cultural studies” (a generic term used to elaborate and explain a number of social- and cultural sciences. In this case it involves sociology, ethnology, anthropology and philosophy).

During the last few years there has been an explosive growth in the number of cell phones in the Nordic countries, and one of the groups who have adapted this new communication technology fast is the youth. All of a sudden the cell phone has turned into a necessity in their daily life, and being connected 24-hours a day has turned into a normal condition. I will in this paper try to explain how the notion of being “connected” affects the way the users perceive “time” as a concept. My analysis is partly based on my masters-thesis in Ethnology from the University of Oslo named “Call Me – a study of youth and cell-phones” done in collaboration with Telenor R&D.

The cultural time

Time - as it is conceived in the western civilization - is an abstracted idea of time based on the measuring of time in years, months, weeks, days and hours. It's a linear time that can be measured and filled with “meaningful activities. This means that time has been heavily based on the structuring properties of the clock. It's a time that should be “used” as good as possible. This means that lunch, coffee breaks, and working out all happens at planned moments. The clock time exists in other words to coordinate our daily chores or activities.

Through the “clock-time” social interaction is made possible in our modern (or late-modern/post-modern) society. It’s a tool to coordinate activities, and has been a necessity in our society. The need for a linear and uniform time has been strengthened by the disembedding of social actions made possible through the use of different forms of mediated communication – and information technology

The mere fact that one has the possibility to communicate with what one can call “the absent others” (Giddens 1990), and thus have the possibility to go beyond the need to coordinate actions beforehand, gives the cell-phone a strong role in what I would like to call the restructuring of time. In other words it’s what Anthony Giddens calls the “disembedding” of social interaction that is the central issue in this matter. A fundamental change in the notion of time happens when it’s possible to exist in a communication-sphere regardless of spatial boundaries. The coordinating aspects of clock-time are put under pressure from the ever present and dynamical restructuring and renegotiation aspects of the cell-phone.

The linear time – as in clock-time – is not changed – what is changed is how the linear time is filled with actions. An underlying point is how the structuring qualities of linear time lose its relevance the moment the user exists in a communication-sphere disembedded from space and time. Still the notion of a linear time is a driving force behind the paradigm that one should fill one’s time with actions. In other words it’s the tyranny of time in the western cultures that sets the limits of our behavior, and to fill the day with “meaningful activities” becomes something important and sought after. The interesting thing regarding this “time-tyranny” is how technology – and in this case communication technology as in the cell-phone affects the use and understanding of time. By giving the individual a possibility to be continuously connected to the social network it breaks down the need to plan the use of time. Instead time becomes something that is used in an ever present “now”. An immediate time that is disconnected from the brute force of linear time and spatial limitations.

The cell-phone can in other words both destructure and structure the user’s time. On one hand it will break up the rigidity of clock-time, and on the other turn the user into a slave of a time-ideology based around the concept of using time. Every second must be filled with action, and all actions shall be felt meaningful. The cell-phone gives the user control over time, and what we have left is a notion of a flexible time - a time that is filled with more and more activities and actions. To quote Benjamin Franklin: “Time is money” – and to waste time is to waste money. Time-economy becomes a central issue. How do the users of this new technology understand and experience the possibility to fill every hour, minute and second with “meaningful actions”?

In the following I’ll analyze how the informants use and understand time, and how they

relate to the “immediacy” that is a central side of the cell-phone. This analysis is dealing with the idea of being available - as in an immediate availability. The cell-phone gives the user a notion of existing “here and now” – and thus the need to fill the present becomes sought after. The analysis is done in two parts to further elaborate the different aspects of an “instantaneous time”. First I’ll dig deeper into the idea of an immediate or instantaneous time, and then I’ll show how this idea of time affects the use of time among my informants.

Instantaneous time

”In the mechanical age now receding, many actions could be taken without too much concern. Slow movements insured that the reactions were delayed for considerable periods of time. Today the action and the reaction occur almost at the same time. We actually live mythically and integrally, as it were, but we continue to think in the old, fragmented space and time patterns of the pre-electrical age.” (McLuhan 1964:4)

The availability offered by the cell-phone does not only gives the possibility to being connected with the ”distant others”, but there is also established a notion of being connected to ones social network in an ever present communication-sphere untied from the limitations of space and time. It’s established an immediate availability where all the persons in ones social network is just a phone call “away”. This immediate availability is a new phenomenon. Earlier forms of communication technology assumed that one was at a certain place to a certain time – as in the telephone – or that one accepted the delay in communication that was experienced when sending the message. The individual-oriented mobile communication breaks down these barriers trough its instantaneous character. It gives the user the possibility to be available no matter time or spatial limitations. John Urry – the British sociologist – describes it this way:

”...A result of the need for instantaneous responses, particularly because of the speed implied by the telephone, telex, fax, electronic signals and so on, the future increasingly appears to dissolve into an extended present.” (Urry 2000:128)

Time is in other words established as an extended ”present”. Trough the use of the cell-phone one exists in a mediated space where being connected is a central issue. One of the young boys that was involved in the research explains the need for availability, and how he understand people who are not ”connected”:

”*Why do you use a cell-phone?* Because its extremely handy, especially when most of my friends use one. I’ve experienced on to many times when I’ve missed something big because I wasn’t available” (boy, 17 years old)

The immediate availability is in other words a central element for sustaining ones role as

an active member of a social network. As the young boy explains in this quote it is important to be available so that he don't miss anything big. This in turn means that plans are done in a "now time". John Urry use the term "instantaneous time" in *Sociology Beyond Societies* (2000), and explains it this way:

"I ... use the term "instantaneous time" to characterize: first, new informational and communicational technologies based upon inconceivably brief instants which are wholly beyond human consciousness; second, the simultaneous character of social and technical relationships which replaces the linear logic of clock-time characterized by the temporal separation of cause and effect occurring over separate measurable instants; and third, a metaphor for the widespread significance of exceptionally short-term and fragmented time, even where it is not literally instantaneous and simultaneous." (Urry 2000:126)

It's all about an understanding of time as something immediate. The American geographer Anthony Townsend calls this phenomenon a "Real-time system", and claims that the metabolism of the city has changed due to the introduction of the cell-phone. Trough the cell-phone it is established a real-time – or an immediate time, a now time. This changes in turn the way city-life is experienced according to Townsend.

"While mobile telephones are sold as a technology that helps conquer constraints of location and geography, it is increasingly apparent that the time-management capabilities of this new tool are equally important. As a result, the widespread use of these devices is quickening the pace of urban life and at an aggregate level, resulting in a dramatic increase in the metabolism of urban systems. This accelerated metabolism is directly tied to the widespread formation of new decentralized information networks facilitated by this new technology" (Townsend 2000:1)

If Townsend is right when he says that the metabolism of the city has change – can one then talk about a corresponding change in the metabolism of social networks? Does the cell-phone establish a new form of social interaction that is distinguished by a higher speed or turnaround? One of the girls (a director of a big school-play) tells us how she feels that the cell-phone help her in her daily routines:

"What do you feel is the most central aspect of the cell-phone? ... Well, it's a way of saving time. You save your strength by having a cell-phone. It's... I don't think I'd survive without my cell-phone being a director. It's impossible... What do you think they did earlier? They used a lot more time, and there's so many things that doesn't work out when you don't have a cell-phone... Things that has to be decided that very moment. ..." (Girl, 17 years, my translation)

She weight the fact that decisions has to made there and then – that they have to be done in real-time so to speak, and that the cell-phone thus saves her time and strength. In her saying there's a fundamental notion or idea that decisions can be made without being

present through the use of a cell-phone. In other words: The cell-phone gives the user the power to change the course of events in real-time without being physically present. This means that she takes the availability for granted. Through this she also takes the immediacy that the cell-phone, as a communication tool, for granted.

The opportunity to an instantaneous availability results in an immediate time where the "time-lag" that existed earlier between the time the message were sent and received are reduced or eliminated. Time – and social collaboration – is influenced by the immediacy expected by the participants in the social network. In other words it's the availability that undermines our notion of time as something linear and measurable, and instead time is experienced as an "extended present" (Urry 2000:128).

The social metabolism has accelerated and social interaction is based on a reality where the participants or actors are available at all times in a communication-sphere. There's no need to wait for someone to call, and therefore one has the possibility to fill one's time with what is considered by the individual as meaningful use of time. The immediate time is effectuated and can be used in the present. The cell-phone has thus turned into a tool in a process of using time as sensible and good as possible. Time is money, and time lost is money lost. Time is not only something to use sensibly or plan to use, but something that should be used in the present. Or to put it with the sociologist Manuel Castells words: "...time is not only compressed: it is processed" (Castells 1996:439).

The idea of immediate response is illustrated in this quote from an interview with a 16-year old girl (my translation):

"If you send a SMS-message, how fast do you want response? In minutes. I expect an immediate response – and one usually does, because people at our age carry their cell-phones close to their heart (laughter). Nobody leaves it home, or turns it off. Ever..."

Immediate response is in other words a requirement for the communication to work as planned. The idea of an immediate availability does also show through the irritation and frustration shown when they don't reach people. John Urry has problematized this "immediate time", and claim that young people today experience time as something that is happening "now". Which means that there is no future and no past, but solely an idea about a "now". He describes it like this:

"... Young people conceptualize the future as more or less instantaneous, and becoming shorter. This generation does not seem to have long-term plans or dreams of the future. ... The younger generation lives in "real-time", seeing the day as having 24 hours in which to eat, sleep, work, relax and play, a kind of student ordering of time writ into the rest of one's life!" (Urry 2000:128)

There is established a form of "timeless time", where time is a mere part of "the space of

flows” – a continuous stream of actions and information (see Castells 1996). According to Castells this means that the information paradigm or network society influence the order of actions in the context one exists. This can be experienced as a form of compression of actions towards immediacy, or by introducing a random discontinuity in the order of actions (see Castells 1996:464).

The order of actions are disconnected from the linearity of time and restructured in the present, and the structuring and synchronizing functions of clock-time is reduced and replaced by availability. Trough being connected and available the need to coordinate activities or action according to a common standard known as clock-time is reduced, and time is thus understood as something immediate. Time is, according to Anthony Townsend, turned into a commodity that is bought and sold trough the cell-phone. Planning of weeks, days and hours is replaced by a continuous stream of renegotiations, new plans and reorganizations (see Townsend 2000:9). John Urry describes the process like this:

”...Instantaneous time also means that the time-space paths of individuals are often desynchronized. There is a greatly increased variation in different people’s times that spread, if not over 24 hours, over much longer periods. People’s activities are less collectively organized and structured as mass consumption patterns are replaced by more varied and segmented patterns.”(Urry 2000:128)

Trough the continuous renegotiation time is under a constant pressure and changing at every moment. This means that appointments can be changed all the time, and one of the girls in the study had pretty clear thoughts on this subject.

“Do you feel that you plan your day different after you got a cell-phone? It’s easier to change plans, and you don’t feel that it matter if you’re late anymore. One can always just call and say that one is late. Appointments has lost their ”validity...” (Girl, 18-years old, my translation)

Availability trough the cell-phone does as shown trough the last pages affect the notion of time. Time is turned into a commodity, which at any moment can be renegotiated, or to use the sociologist Richard Ling’s term, there’s movement towards a “softening of time” (see Ling 1999:6) made possible trough the availability. It gives the user at way to master time. A direct consequence of this is a compression of time, and I will in the following explain this further.

The compression of time – or towards a ”compact time”

In our linear understanding of time there is periods where we experience what one can call “action-oriented time” (see Johansen 1985:113). These periods gives us breathing space outside the structuring properties of the clock-time. Examples of these periods can be play,

nature experiences and eroticism (see Johansen 1990). The character of time changes when one exists in one of these time-spaces, and time is experienced as a sequence of actions. Time is in other words experienced as a “free time”, and thus gives the stringent linear time porosity. What happens with this time when one all of a sudden is always connected and available? The Italian media-researcher Leopoldina Fortunati describes how being connected affects us this way:

“Time is socially perceived as something that must be filled up to the very smallest folds. The mobile has certainly given a lot to this communicative dimension. Therefore work in both its emotional and psychological dimensions can be carried out all the time; in motorway traffic jams, in bank or post office queues or in public offices. In fact we waste less and less time, as we are always using this instrument, if only to activate the umbilical cord that helps us to reduce anxiousness and uncertainty” (Fortunati 2000:19).

The big issue here is how the periods when the individual earlier had “free time” – and was incommunicado – have changed. These periods can for instance be when one is traveling to and from work, when one is waiting for the tram, or just when one is bored. Does the availability give the user a possibility to fill these times – when one earlier was in incommunicado – with actions? And thus we end up with an action-packed present, and that all “free time” are filled with social interaction in one form or another. In the following I’ll try to explain and elaborate what I would like to call a compressed time on basis of the informants experiences of the use of a cell-phone.

The informants showed through my fieldwork a strong consciousness regarding being connected, and the cell-phone had a central place in all activities. Checking for SMS-messages is almost an unconscious habit done in all situations, and making phone-calls and sending SMS-messages is done at all times – also in situations when one would not use or have access to an ordinary phone. The period when one is available is borderless, and communication that earlier was done at home or in phone-booths can now be made everywhere and at any time. The individual character of the conversation breaks down the barriers and norms regarding when and whom to call. Through being a part of a social network through the cell-phone, and thus existing in a phone-sphere, one is available 24-hours a day. By removing the rules of when one can be called there also happens a change in the understanding of time. It becomes something that is available and can be used – or filled with actions – in the present. One of the girls in the study elaborate how she plan her days after she got herself a cell-phone:

”Is there a change in how you use your days? ... Yes, definitely. Earlier you had to... well, people couldn’t reach you. So either one had to follow the plans, or get to a phone booth... But you know... who should one call when they already are out... And it’s more like... people call me and say that they’re there and there and

ask me to drop by... One doesn't go to a phone booth to check whether some of your friends are on a café. That's impossible..." (Girl, 16, my translation)

Trough being connected trough the day she has the opportunity to coordinate her activities and make plans regardless of time and space. She can "use" the time better. The cell-phone gives her a way to regain control of her own time, and fill it with what she consider as meaningful actions. Time is in other words understood as something that should be filled with as many meaningful actions as possible according to what I earlier described as the time-economy that is the base of a linear understanding of time. Time is a limited resource and should be used sensibly. By having the possibility to exist more that one place at the time one has the possibility to affect decisions made at times when one earlier was incommunicado. By using a cell-phone the need to be physically present to interact is eliminated, and the instant availability gives the user a new way to coordinate actions disconnected from the clock-time. Fractions of a second doesn't freeze time anymore, but instead it's the ever-present social network one is a part of that coordinates ones actions. The immediate availability is taken for given, and is materialized in an action-packed time where every hour, minute and second has to be filled with meaningful actions. All the holes – or the timeless times – are filled with actions according to the idea that time is money.

Summary

The notion of time is always under pressure in all societies or cultures, and as I've tried to show in this article the western culture is on the verge to experience a fundamental change in how time is understood. By changing the way we interact and structure our daily lives the cell-phone has gone from a mere development from the ordinary – or old – telephone, to a tool that possibly could change the way we understand our lives. The ever-present availability gives us an idea of time as something that is happening in the moment, and accordingly there's a change in mentality. Time is not something that one plans to fill with actions in the future, but something that one wish to consume in the moment. The linear time is hence under pressure, and the cell-phone breaks up the stringent row of actions. Trough the availability and the strengthened time-economy one seeks to fill the day with more actions. This means that the "free-times" that one had earlier is broken down and understood as something not "useful".

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