

Introduction

Today, communication and social interaction are to a large extent influenced by different new media. In turn, these new media expand the possibilities of how we relate to each other. Do new media bring people closer together? In which ways can the usage of new technologies such as the mobile telephone, frequently used and quickly domesticated by young people, influence the way intimacy and social interaction are constituted?

My aim with this paper is to examine how young Norwegian people's mobile telephone communication influences the private/public distinction, and in particular to examine how intimacy takes place, is experienced, and is acted out through text messages. In order to study this, I will give a brief social and historical outline on how the meanings of intimacy, seen through friendship, have changed through time. In the second part of the paper I will shed light on how new technology makes *new* meanings of intimacy and performances of the selves possible. In the final section, I will examine, in a Foucauldian manner, how these text message "performances" may have parallels to the ancient Greek custom of writing personal notebooks. The analyses are mainly based on the stories of one of my fieldwork's heaviest text-message prod-users¹, Tina.

The Intimacy Fiction

According to Lynn Jamieson, the concept of intimate relationship may be associated with dimensions such as love, caring, sharing, close friend-

¹ As Dana Boyd claims in her blog, the term "user" has a negative association with drugs and addiction, and may also indicate a lack of creative position. She is looking for a replacement term that conveys "producer", "user" and "consumer" all in one. For further discussion see: http://www.zephoria.org/thoughts/archives/2004/10/06/the_term_user.html#comments. For now, I prefer to use "prod-user" in an attempt to make the term more empowered and creative.

ship, “deep” understanding, and privileged knowledge.² To have intense interaction with a person or to share detailed knowledge about each other requires trust and faith, which in turn are central aspects of intimacy and friendship. Hence, one of the foremost hallmarks of a modern friendship is that friends are voluntarily chosen. Friends select each other based on a personal inclination, where mutual sympathy and individual choices are required. This is in contrast with kinship, which is not chosen, but obligatory and ascribed. However, as Jamieson also points out, dimensions of intimacy and expectations of needs in terms of love and caring are culturally multifaceted and socially constructed, and vary and take on different meanings over time.³ The following section will outline some social and historical aspects of how the meanings of intimate relations seen through friendship have changed through history.

The *Philos* Metaphor

A common ancient Greek term that describes friendship is *philos*. The term describes people who are closely connected with each other, either as friends or kin. However, according to the philosopher Helge Svare, being someone’s *philos* entailed some very specific ways and norms of conduct that are more similar to the politeness we exhibit today with neighbours, relatives, and colleagues.⁴ Other terms used were *xenos* and *hetairos*, both of which signify relations with specific responsibilities and obligations.

Today, *philos*, *xenos*, and *hetairos* would probably be characterized as a duty friendship based on an unspoken agreement of protecting and supporting each other in conflicts and difficult situations.⁵ Whether there was friendship in ancient times based on the modern characteristics of the term (mutual sympathy and individual choices) is not known, but it is assumed that the unstable and insecure social and economical conditions of the era prompted friendship out of necessity. However, in the Aristotelian writings, stories describing “good friendship” based on pure pleasure and personal emotions can be found. In other stories, from around the first century A.D., “good friendship”, in the sense of relations with love and pleasure, is seen to be valued.⁶

² Lynn Jamieson, *Intimacy: Personal Relationship in Modern Societies*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Helge Svare, *Vennskap*, Oslo: Pax Forlag, 2004.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁶ Michel de Montaigne, “Essay on Friendship” and Seneca, “On Grief of Lost Friends”, in Michael Pakaluk (ed.), *Other Selves: Philosophers on Friendship*, Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1991.

Nevertheless, it is the Renaissance that is recognized as the era where friendships became more personal and emotionally closer. The break with the Middle Ages gave rise to, and emphasized, a more individual lifestyle. Philosophical meditations on friendship are plentiful in the essays of the French philosopher and writer Michel de Montaigne. In one of his essays, Montaigne's relationship with his friend Étienne de la Boétie is described as "two people melting together ... becoming one person with one will".⁷ Later on, in the 17th and 18th centuries, romantic friendship is frequently seen expressed in letters, stories, and other literary writings between same-sex friends. In this period, relationships that involved passion and strong emotions were highly valued and treasured socially. These relationships were supposed to be found with a close friend, or rather, one's "twin soul".

However, in the transition between the 18th and the 19th centuries, this idea changed radically as a new capitalist economy spurred the growth of cities. In turn, this made people's identities less connected with kin and class, which to a considerable extent made it possible or necessary for people to make their own identity through acts and achievements.⁸ Accordingly, new distinctions and norms between the public and the private followed. Subsequently, this made the home and marriage the very core private setting for intense intimacy.⁹ The cultural and social shift meant a further separation of private homes and public spaces, as married couples increasingly protected their relationship with isolation and distance from others. As a result, traditional pre-modern common community life disappeared, leaving people without a family household a small minority.¹⁰ These changes influenced the distinction between public and private, as well as the meaning of intimacy and gender.

By looking at the historical and social shifts in the meanings of intimacy, the outline above has shed light on how these distinctions may appear as cultural constructions. In the next section, I will follow this outline focusing on how the meaning of intimacy can be influenced and even re-shaped by new technologies such as mobile telephony. This will be seen through the perspective of Tina, the most frequent text-message prod-user in both of my empirical fieldwork projects.¹¹

⁷ Svare, *op. cit.*, p. 63, my translation.

⁸ Øystein S. Ziener and Jørgen Lorentzen, *Homoseksualitet? Homotekstualitet?*, Oslo: UniPub Forlag, 2001.

⁹ Jamieson, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ My previous work on mobile phone communication is based on an empirical study of nine young (15–16 years) text-messaging girls. Together with focus interviews, the same girls forwarded all their text messages (both sent and received) to my mobile phone

Almost Like a Drug...

The first time I met Tina, she had just turned sixteen. At that point she had forwarded about 300 text messages to my mobile telephone during five days.¹² She expressed very clearly her relation to her mobile telephone with these words:

My life was less full before I got a mobile phone.¹³

Tina has now turned eighteen years old, but despite some changes in her text messaging habits, she still ranks her mobile telephone as the most important material item in her life. Below, Tina tells the story of how her relationship with her current boyfriend started. The story sheds light in particular on how new technology in itself can make parallel, diverse, and multiple intimacies possible.

In the beginning, when I met Tor, we told each other via text messages that we liked each other, and we sent lots of messages at that time. After a while, we wrote that we wanted to kiss and things like that, but when we met the next day at school, we didn't even dare to speak or to look at each other at all. It was very embarrassing. However, when we got home, we just started messaging again. Then it wasn't that dangerous, it wasn't embarrassing... After a while we wrote "I want to have sex with you" – even though we couldn't speak together at school. ... I don't know why one dares to write such things, but it felt like two different worlds. Somehow it seemed to be another boy. It felt like that. At least I thought that's how it was ... maybe one is "a bit drunk" when one writes messages. After all, that's how it seems. We lose our inhibitions. Then you aren't shy and can say things just the way you feel ... almost like a drug.

As can clearly be seen, Tina sketches out at least two very different worlds

for a one-month period. Now, three years later, the participant group is larger and older (18–19 years), but the subjects from my previous study are still involved. As multi-media messages were introduced in Norway in 2003, my empirical data includes interviews, forwarded text-messages, and also forwarded multimedia messages (MMS messages) such as animations and photo-images.

¹² The first fieldwork took place in 2001.

¹³ Lin Prøitz, *Tilgjengelighetens uutholdelige letthet: En studie av bruk, selvforståelse og iscenesettelse av kjønn i tekstmeldinger* ("The unbearable lightness of availability: A study of usage, self-understanding and gender performances through text messages"), Master Thesis at the Department of Media and Communication, Oslo: University of Oslo, 2003.

in terms of intimacy. In the face-to-face world, they are both shy and embarrassed, whereas in the text-messaging world they act very differently, they are quite self-confident and valiant. They play with sexual issues as they express intimate and sexual desires as well as excite each other far beyond their face-to-face limits. As Tina puts it, “it felt like two different worlds. Somehow, it seemed to be another boy.” The quote may reveal how individual navigation in the performance of intimacies and selves emerges in the very moment of *the* performance, here presented by Tina experiencing the text-messaging world as distinct from the face-to-face world, but nevertheless both are experienced as *real*. The fragmentation of traditional social forms influenced by the introduction of new technologies is here seen as producing spaces in which different meanings of intimacy appear. I would argue, as Jamieson does, that individualization gives rise to further opportunities for self-expression, including the expression of emotions, which in turn will open up multiple ways of performing and experiencing intimacy.¹⁴

According to Tina’s words, the text-messaging world and the face-to-face world appear as quite separate and distinct arenas. The closeness and intimacy that Tina and Tor experienced with each other via text messages were not transferred into the face-to-face world. They did not even dare to look at each other at school. However, after a while, Tor started to call Tina. Tina experienced this as quite uncomfortable:

It was okay ... but in the beginning it was a bit embarrassing because I couldn’t stop and think in the way you do with text messages... in the beginning we had quite superficial conversations about what we were doing and such things, but after a while it became more challenging... phone calls are a bit more personal.

The embarrassing point here seems to be related to the reciprocity of the examination of the other, where control is lacking. In an asynchronous text message communication, Tina would be able to read, edit, and rewrite the text before she sent it. In a synchronous telephone call conversation, these options are not present.

However, producing text message spaces in which new innovations of intimacy can appear unfettered by the face-to-face world may be of its own value, as Tina testifies when describing her relationship with a boy who actually does not like her in the face-to-face world:

¹⁴ Jamieson, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

Yes, there is a boy I like, but I know he doesn't like me. But he seems so nice in his messages. So I choose to live in that world in a way. In a way we are together in messages. Pretending.

As shown in this case, Tina chose the most convenient world, the text-messaging world, where various ways to cultivate and reinvent selves and intimacies seem to appear. To see the self as a reflexive project is closely related to Michel Foucault's interpretations of the term. In the final section, I will look at how this reinventing and reshaping of selves and intimacies may be a continuation of the old Greek custom described by Michel Foucault as "technologies of the self".

(Re)making the Relationship

According to Foucault, there were four relevant types of technologies, all related to specific techniques that people would use to understand themselves.¹⁵ Each of the technologies worked out as a matrix of practical reason:

(1) technologies of production, which permit us to produce, transform, or manipulate things, (2) technologies of sign systems, which permit us to use signs, meanings, symbols or signification, (3) technologies of power, which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject, (4) technologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.¹⁶

In this paper I will focus on the fourth technology, i.e., technologies of the self, in order to examine to which extent the ancient "self-ordering" of the individual parallels to the text-messaging culture of today.

The techniques of the self consist of self-mastery and self-knowledge: If you take care of your self by concerning yourself, you will achieve self-knowledge. In a way, this art of existence refers to the ways in which we learn to present ourselves as works of everyday art. However, being

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth (Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984, Volume 1)*, ed. by Paul Rabinow, Penguin Books, 2000, p. 224.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

able to embody the exercise of power on and through oneself is supposed to epitomize the route to all social goods, which in turn develops your manner and morale and makes you into a good, dutiful, and obedient citizen and worker. Hence, the improvement of human manner and morality are the main ethical aspects of self-caring.

One way to achieve this self-mastery was to keep notebooks that, according to Foucault, had a role as a “truth test”, and therefore functioned as a personal exercise:

a ... labor of thought, a labor through writing, a labor in reality.¹⁷

The individual notebook, or *Hypomnemata*, was a guide for conduct where the intent was to capture and transform what was said, heard, or read in order to “shape oneself”. Foucault sees the role of this self-writing as a “principle of rational action in the writer himself”.¹⁸ By examining the old ancient custom of writing notebooks as a “labor of thought, a labor through writing, a labor in reality”, I will now look at how self-writing as a conduct of the self may have been inherited by mobile telephone prod-users in the modern world due to incessant text-message communication.

In the excerpt below, I will continue to follow Tina as she describes how one typical text-messaging day would take place. Her description covers her text-message movements from the moment she wakes up until she goes to sleep at night:

When I wake up, I check my mobile and see if I have received any messages. And my mobile is just beside my head when I sleep. It is in silent-mode. Then I turn off the silent-mode and check if there are any messages, and if not I'll write a message to my boyfriend: “Are you awake? I just woke up now.” And then he writes back and says that he has been awake for an hour and is going to take a shower. And then, I write “Okay, I'll take a shower as well”. And then I take the shower, and when I am finished I write a message “I am finished taking a shower”. Then he writes, “I was finished half an hour ago” [laughs]. And so I write “Okay, what happens next?” and he will answer something about that he needs to do some work, but he will come over in about half an hour or so. And then I write that I'll eat and dress or something like that. Then he writes “Okay”. After doing that I'll write “Are you coming

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

soon?” and then just “Yes, I’m coming over now”. And then I’ll wait until I receive a message from him saying “I’m at the parking lot. Come down!” and then I’ll write “Okay, I’m coming down”. Then I’ll go down and we drive to his place. After some hours I receive a message from mum who asks “When are you coming home? Where are you?” I reply that I am at Tor’s house, and that I will come home soon. Then she writes “Okay, just make sure you’re home for dinner at four o’clock”, and then I write “I’ll leave soon”. Then I go home. After I have eaten, I write to my boyfriend “I am finished with eating now” and then he replies “I can come over to your place after watching Hotell Caesar¹⁹”. And then I’ll write “Okay”. Then he shows up. And when he is at my place, he is the one who receives messages from his parents. When he has left, I go to bed – and then I’ll wait for messages from him where it says that he has arrived safely home. I want to know because he has just got a driver license so I worry about him driving off the road or something. Then I receive a message again: “I’m home now. Good night, sweetheart” and then I’ll write “Yes, good night! I love you very much!”. Then I fall asleep. [laughs]

When reading the excerpt above, I am astounded by the massive amount of messages this young couple produces, apparently self-imposed and used to continuously self-report their everyday life. There are several aspects here that I would like to discuss. At first sight, it seems that the main purpose of Tina’s text messaging with her boyfriend is to coordinate a meeting during the day. Nevertheless, instead of making an appointment immediately, they send persistent text messages to each other from the very moment they wake up until they go to sleep – interrupted only, so to speak, by the text message break that occurs when they are physically together.

Does this practice have parallels to an operation on thoughts, conduct, and way of being in order to shape oneself? If we take a closer look at Tina’s story, we find that she sent and received 20–25 text messages that day. The high amount of text messages together with the very detailed self-reporting texts such as “I just woke up now”, “I’m finished taking the shower”, “I’m finished with eating now”, “Now I’m home, good night sweetheart”, may be interpreted as, if not *guides* for conduct, at least as *reports* for conduct. Each step she takes, each movement she does is reported, and when there is a break in the text message traffic, she seems somewhat paralyzed: “... and then I’ll wait until I receive a

¹⁹ A Norwegian TV-soap series.

message from him saying ‘I’m at the parking lot. Come down!’”, as if every “sending surface”, each moment is completely covered and consumed.

One can look at text messages as a modern, individual notebook as demonstrated in the way this young couple captures and transforms what is said and done by bringing to light the impulses of thought. As we have seen from the excerpt, the non-stop commentary of Tina’s and Tor’s everyday movements are documented. According to Foucault, the intent of the *Hupommemata* was indeed this everyday documentary:

The intent is ... to capture the already said, to collect what one has managed to hear or read, and for a purpose that is nothing less than the shaping of the self.²⁰

In this respect, the young couple’s text-messaging practice indeed has clear parallels with the ancient notebook. The idea was that by writing, one read what one had written, and in turn this exercise would provide occasions for a personal exercise of the self. In my previous study, the participants made a point out of the technology’s characteristic that allows one to thoroughly think through what one writes while writing it.²¹ This is the point Tina highlighted in the last section, emphasizing how embarrassing it was when her boyfriend started to telephone her instead of keeping the contact on a text-messaging level. However, there are of course obvious and several differences between the ancient Greek *Hupommemata* and text messages. First of all, the major purpose of the notebook was not to communicate with others, but mainly to take notes for oneself as part of one’s own improvement of manner and morality.²² The other main difference concerns the storage of the texts. Text messages seem to be of a much more temporary nature than the *Hupommemata* writings. The study participants say they store those text messages that make them feel good or those texts that are from someone they care about, but mainly they delete both the sent and the received text messages after a short time. Although the Foucauldian idiom may not be completely satisfactory in articulating this comparison, I would argue that it is an interesting supplement in understanding how self-caring and the self are accentuated by the means of text messages. Then again, as first proposed, the expected meeting between Tina and her boyfriend

²⁰ Foucault, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

²¹ Proitz, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

²² The notebook could serve in correspondence as raw material for text that one sends to others, although this was not the main purpose.

seemed to be the main purpose of the communication. At second glance however, the communication and the *momentary orientation in itself* appear as significant as the primary purpose. Likewise, the high frequency of text messages can also underline and confirm the couple's belonging to each other. In that respect, it may not be the self as such that is re-made or taken care of, but rather a *relationship* that is remade.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined the ways in which the usage of mobile telephone communication such as text messages have influenced social interaction and intimacies amongst young people. In order to study how intimacies can be seen as a cultural construct, I provided a short historical outline as well as analyses of interview excerpts. Furthermore, I have shown how Foucault's perspectives have been fruitful in terms of examining self-caring through text messages. By looking at the text message documentation of Tina's everyday life, I have shed light on how text messages can be seen as a continuation of the ancient personal self-writing exercise. Although the parallels were apparent, the rate of recurrence of Tina's text messages emphasized how the impermanent orientation in itself, as well as the avowal of these young people's belonging to each other, draws attention to a "technology of a *relationship*" – rather than the Foucauldian technologies of the self. The study also shows that mobile telephone communication influences, transforms, and even customizes young people's social interaction to an extent that will bring forth new challenges to both the aesthetics – and signifying perceptions – of intimacies.