

‘Inter-space’ – The New ‘Real Estate’

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Over the past six years in various guises I have been researching how individuals behave when using mobile devices. The work that forms the basis for my thoughts today comes from Me My Mobile and I, a longitudinal study now in its fourth year. The research is conducted by a consortium of research centres – the Centre for the Study of Media, Technology and Culture, now at Lancaster University’s Institute for the Advanced Study of Management and Social Sciences, the private research company Teleonomy and Henley Management College.

At this conference last year I discussed some of the findings from our third round of research, currently a fourth phase is in the process of being researched, the new research poses many additional behavioural questions, so what I am about to talk about should be seen as a reflection on just one aspect of the previous research so far. In passing I should say that the empirical research is UK based and is both qualitative and quantitative involving some 70 plus individual interviews per phase and a quantitative sampling of over 1000 per phase.

Our work, whilst drawing on the various academic social sciences or ‘ologies’ – sociology, psychology, anthropology and others also tries to think about what the behaviours we observe and think about might mean for the industry that has grown up

around mobile services on a strategic and commercial level. For this reason I gave this brief set of thoughts the working title- 'Inter-space'- The New 'Real Estate', by real-estate I mean a space or area that our research indicates is of central importance to users and therefore represents a very significant commercial opportunity.

So what do I mean by 'Inter-space'? Just to slightly complicate things it comes in two forms but the forms themselves are easy to understand. The first idea of inter-space is time/space between events or arrangements, an example of this being me sitting here and arranging to meet Richard (one of the other speakers) for coffee at one of the exhibition areas tomorrow. What becomes of significant interest is how we 'fill' the time/space between the arrangement being made and it being kept in relation to one another. I will return to this in just a moment.

The second idea relates to what happens as we move between spaces (I should add that these are more than just physical spaces they represent mental predispositions in addition), say as we move between spaces that we might consider a work space to a more social space. In other words it relates to more locational aspects of behaviour whilst we are mobile or in transit.

Ok so to return to the first idea, the idea of the space/time between arrangements being made and kept, we could call the making of the arrangement point A and the keeping of the arrangement point B. What our research has clearly demonstrated is that over the last three years there has been an explosion of contacts filling this area between A and B. In other words, to return to my example with Richard, there is a very strong possibility that following us having made the arrangement just now,

physically, and before we meet for coffee, if indeed we do meet, there will be a number of direct contacts, using a range of devices, but primarily our mobile phones. These contacts may be voice, SMS, or less likely MMS. We may confirm the arrangement, discuss some activity or thoughts relating to it, or and this is becoming increasingly frequent, re-arrange it, making small timing or locational changes or indeed re-arranging it completely. All of this is in addition to standard uses of phone/PDA functionality such as diary, address book, notes etc.. In other words our lives are increasingly characterised by fluxes and fluidities of relationships and arrangements, a sort of simultaneity of network maintenance activities. Our last phase of research clearly showed making and altering arrangements were the most dominant uses of mobile phones using either voice or SMS. When talking to users we heard quotes such as *'now they just say meet you in town, then you wait 'till your somewhere near to say exactly where'* or *'before mobiles you couldn't be flexible, you had to be there when you said, but now you just ring or text'*.

There is now so much going on between our points A and B that at times it appears this matters more than actually keeping the arrangement, a bit like an event where the preparation and anticipation becomes often more important than the actual event. However whilst many of these contacts are small or transitory there is evidence that users whilst continuing to create these micro interchanges are having increasing difficulty managing them. Therefore managing all this traffic can be a real issue, and here in lies a very real opportunity. By way of explanation and as a slight digression, some of you may have read in Saturdays UK press some findings from an American psychologist, Barry Schwartz, he identifies what he calls "choice fatigue". Stated simply we have too many options and too many choices to make, negotiating this

makes us feel miserable, we feel uncertain and out of control. The parallel with the inter-space idea is that as each one of us makes, adds detail to and alters arrangements we are becoming increasingly pressured and subject to increasing difficulty in ordering our lives and this is despite us also believing we are gaining new found flexibility, it is here a major opportunity lies.

Our work clearly demonstrated a need for improved tools for call management, storage and search and improved data synchronicity between devices. Managing the often-complex networks of contacts, where a particular sequence of contacts may involve several modes is simply becoming too stressful. Yet at the same time the volume of contacts continues to rise whilst not to be available for contact, either incoming or outbound is increasingly leading to a perceived or often actual exclusion from social networks. Users are seeking easy to use services and applications that allow them to partition contact types and subjects, to store more than just names, numbers and favourites, allow the active management of sequences of activity, retrieve data and final to exchange data easily with other devices. In other words management and control tools that by being easy, hand back control to the user and so creating a more managed yet still fluid set of relationships.

If we now turning briefly to the second idea of inter-space, transit between spaces, we can see how the opportunity for the services just outlined becomes even more acute. Here our research data, whilst still using data from Me My Mobile and I draws on additional research from a further longitudinal study, Urban Behaviours; a study of the behaviours of 15-35 year olds in the eight major urban conurbations in the UK. We were able to combine these programmes to create a picture of how particular

emotions (we examined combinations of 12 emotions including, happy aroused, content) play out in certain contexts, for instance receiving an SMS message in a public situation from a friend at a certain time or in a queue after 7pm at night, on your own receiving a solicited text message. In itself I think this work can be described as ground breaking, as it does to a significant extent, using the tool, allow us to come up with guidance for how and what affect a defined location based service will have on a particular target group. However further exploration demonstrated that for context or location based services to be successful you need to have more awareness than just the physical setting, social setting, time, nature and content of the contact or task. It is important to understand what we defined as the ‘antecedent’ behaviour or ‘disposition’ of individuals, in other words the disposition they bring into the context. This is in part achieved by understanding what physical and mental spaces are of greatest importance and how individuals transit between these spaces. For instance in the Urban Behaviours research we were able to define 6 broad behavioural segmentations, each was named, for example the ‘homeostatic’ and ‘homedynamic’ groupings and was based on importance and dominance of three larger space groupings, social, work and home space. Each of the 6 segments behaves very differently when placed in the same contextual location. Also each segment behaves very differently in transit between the three larger space groups. However when this data is added to the existing location or context data the ability to predict the likely outcomes of location services rises still further. Additionally you begin to understand how ‘available’ a particular group is to media influence whilst actually in transit. Or in other words the value of transit related inter-space lies in its importance as the location for many contact activities and as the space in which to stimulate, promote or assist the use of mobile service. So for example one of our 6 segmented

groups spends more time in transit than any other (they need to do this to maintain their balance between social, work and home spaces) additionally whilst in transit they are very aware of their surroundings and are directly influenced by passing messages leading to users saying things such as *'I've looked on the internet on my phone before after passing a Billboard'* and *'when I am on the train I do the best I can to get things organised'*. Obviously this segment can and must to be commercially successful, be treated in a very different way to any other segment, particularly one whose disposition is to use transit space/time in a very focussed manner.

We are all aware and have views on the opportunity for location based services. However what emerges from this work is how taking those opportunities will require a far more imaginative attitude toward segmentation than the standard demographic, or even the attitudinal approach still followed by the vast majority of organisations. If a deeper and more user behaviour centric approach is taken and is combined with a genuine inter-media strategy, where triggers and supports are embedded within a multi-layered fabric of media experience location services can and will not only come alive but become truly significant revenue earners.

Very briefly I have tried to outline a set of opportunities that based on behavioural research appear to represent significant commercial potential. Taking these does require some real thought, particularly in the way we think about users, in terms of providing them with tools and opportunities to manage their lives, whilst at the same time better understanding how they are influenced and use services. Thinking differently may require us to reframe our relationship with the users of our services

and particularly to re-visit some of our existing thoughts around segmentation.

However the evidence is very strong that this transitional space, the inter-space does appear to present us with a real-estate waiting for commercial population.