
New Tech, New Ties

How Mobile Communication Is Reshaping Social Cohesion

Rich Ling

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Preface

Where I work, we have a tradition, or perhaps a ritual. Its functioning illustrates some of the main themes of this book: the relationship between ritual and social cohesion, with some aspects of mediated interaction in the mix.

Every Friday at 2 P.M., we gather and have a lottery for four or five bottles of wine. There are two rules: a person cannot win more than one bottle, and the winner of the last bottle is responsible for organizing the event the following week. We have several books of lottery tickets in various colors, and for 10 kroner each (equal to about 60 cents) one may buy as many chances as one wishes.

During the time that we are purchasing tickets, there is a lot of discussion as to which color is the lucky one. Some people buy only one ticket; some buy five or six. Some people buy only yellow tickets; some buy one of each color. The color selection and the number purchased by different people are topics of common discussion. After the tickets are bought, we sit in anticipation of the drawing. Some people make side deals by swapping tickets and discussing schemes for increasing their chances. Some people who do not have any small change on them borrow from the common bank for the lottery, and later there are loud and good-natured efforts at calling in the loans with threats of usurious interest rates.

People who are away on Friday afternoon often send text messages or emails to colleagues with requests to spot them the money for some lottery tickets, and colleagues who have been as far afield as Pakistan and the United States have won in the lottery. Upon winning, these remote participants receive a text message that advises them of their good luck. In addition, the messages often contain threats that the prize will be consumed before their return.

We always draw first for the least expensive bottle and last for the most expensive one. If someone has won a less expensive bottle but then has the fortune of winning a more expensive one, he or she may exchange the cheaper bottle for the more expensive one, and we then have a new drawing for the bottle that has been put back on the table.

In the worst case, the rules can result in someone's winning an inferior bottle of wine but still having to organize the following week's lottery. This happens when someone who has won a less expensive bottle also wins the most expensive one and puts the cheaper bottle back on the table for a new drawing. Since this cheaper bottle is the last bottle on the table, the person winning that one also has the responsibility of organizing the lottery the following week. Thus, winning this bottle is tinged with unwanted acquisition of responsibility. If the winner does not follow through on the responsibility, it is a serious breach of norms.

The wine lottery is anticipated. It marks the ending of the work week. It gives us an informal opportunity to gather and chat and to have one last laugh together before the weekend. It generates a certain group history, and the various intrigues and unanticipated outcomes are a small but important element in the flux of our interaction. In sum, the event helps to tie us together as a group.

We collectively engineer a lighthearted mood, and in that engineering of a mood we connect in a way that deepens our sense of group identity. The staging of the event, the joy or faux disappointment at the outcome of the drawing, and the petty but transparent attempts to jigger the results are all parts of the play. There are jeers when only the women or only the people on one side of the table win. There are assertions that absent participants have won empty bottles, and there is false anguish when the winning ticket is only one digit away from the ticket someone is holding. These elements are also how we engage in the generation of good will and group identity. We remember that K___ wins too often for our taste, or that T___ is all too conservative in her purchasing of tickets. Our mutual recognition of a common mood is the core of the tradition, and it helps to generate a common sense of identity and cohesion.

Our weekly wine lottery is a ritual. The event is a ritual in the more common sense of the word, since it happens with certain regularity, it follows a certain form, and the process of staging it is similar from week to week. The more interesting part, however, is the Durkheimian/

Goffmanian sense of ritual that is played out here. Rather than looking at the regularity of the event or the liturgy used in the staging of the affair, it is important to look at the sense of mutual recognized engagement that arises when we gather. This, in turn, generates a common sense of what Durkheim calls “effervescence.” It is through this kind of process that the group develops its sense of identity. The more serious tones of the work week are cast aside and levity takes center stage. I know that my colleagues are there for a laugh, as am I. It gives us something to talk about, and it helps to define who is a member of the group and who is not.

Like many other rituals, the wine lottery is based largely on co-present interaction. But the line between the co-present and the non-present is becoming less distinct. On occasion, colleagues who are in a meeting in another portion of the building or those who are in Kuala Lumpur, Dhaka, or New York have participated, albeit somewhat indirectly.

Thus, in this seemingly banal event, we have, in a neat little package, ritual interaction, cohesion, and mediated communication.

Mobile communication allows us to participate in social interactions that were previously reserved for only those who were physically present. This is not to say that the wine lottery is about to become entirely virtual. The real core of the tradition is the co-present interaction. Without that interaction, there would be no atmosphere, no excitement, no effervescence. But participation has been given a new dimension. The absent colleague is a part of the interaction. The interactions the absent colleague must go through to secure a loan from a present colleague and the good-natured insults and threats the absent colleague must endure should he or she win have become parts of the interaction.

It is enticing to say that our wine lottery exemplifies certain changes that are happening in society. Mobile communication is being used in the pursuit of romance, in the coordination of families, in the exchanging of humor and gossip, and in many other daily situations. In each case, there are ritual forms, there is reliance on co-present understandings, and there is development—and sometimes erosion—of social cohesion. These are the themes I examine in this book.