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Examining the Social Affordances of Communication Technology on Human Relations: A Critique of Networked Individualism from the Perspective of the Ethical Phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas

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ABSTRACT

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In this thesis, I ask how our understanding of human relations carries implications for the way we understand the affordances of communication technology on human relations. To this end, I examine and compare two opposed perspectives of human relations and social life. The first perspective, networked individualism, is a version of network theory that begins with a foundation of agentic individuals who actively construct and manage their social worlds. Levinasian relationalism, the second perspective, offers a contrasting view that sees human relations as constitutive of human subjectivity. In comparing these two perspectives, I argue that networked individualism is an inadequate framework inasmuch as its ontological assertions prevent it from seeing some of the significant affordances of technology on human relations, and I suggest that Levinasian relationalism is a viable alternative.

Keywords: information and communication technologies (ICTs), human relations, social networks, networked individualism, relational ontology, ethical phenomenology, Barry Wellman, Emmanuel Levinas

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INTRODUCTION

There is little doubt that modern technology has had a significant impact on the social world. Everyone living in North America of a certain age has witnessed the development of a new way of life, characterized by widespread adoption of information and communication technologies (ICTs). Computers and cell phones in particular have taken center stage, going from curious novelties to necessary accessories. As of January 2014, 90% of American adults own a cell phone, and 58% of cell phone owners have smart phones. 85% of American adults regularly access the Internet, and 63% of American adults use a smart phone to go online (PewResearch Internet Project 2014). The idea of the cyborg, once an odd image of science fiction, is now a perceptive description of mundane life. In the words of Sherry Turkle (2012), "we are all cyborgs now."

Despite the tremendous scope of these changes, the question of what this all means for human relations is still open for debate. Authors have presented a wide variety of conflicting arguments regarding the possibilities of these devices for human life. While some authors have heralded the arrival of personal freedom, virtual community and endless creative possibilities (Bakardjieva 2003; Rheingold 2000; Shirky 2008), others fear increases in addiction (Young 1998) and isolation (Morahan-Martin and Schumacher 2003; Turkle 2012) and the rise of a meaningless world filled with poorly-executed projects (Keen 2008). All these conflicting accounts may make the search for a scientific understanding of the social impact of technology appear hopeless, but if we take seriously the possibility that all of these conflicting accounts may have some truth to them, we arrive at a key starting point in the technology debate: modern devices create social affordances, but they do not *cause* any particular outcome (Hutchby 2001; Wellman, Quan‐Haase, Boase, Chen, Hampton, Diaz, and Miyata 2003). As White (1964) says,

"As our understanding of the history of technology increases, it becomes clear that a new device merely opens a door; it does not compel one to enter." As attractive as simple deterministic accounts may be, there is too much variability in technology use and social outcomes to take them as adequate or complete.

Even though the social impact of technology resists deterministic explanations, we are not left to merely assume that its influence is neutral or relativistic. As Melvin Kranzberg famously said, "Technology is neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral." When authors speak of the *affordances* of technology, they refer to this middle position. According to Hutchby (2001)

> "[A]ffordances are functional and relations aspects which frame, while not determining, the possibilities for agentic action in relation to an object. In this way, technologies can be understood as artefacts which may be both shaped by and shaping of the practices humans use in interaction with, around and through them. This 'third way' between the (constructivist) emphasis on the shaping power of human agency and the (realist) emphasis on the constraining power of technical capacities opens the way for new analyses of how technological artefacts become important elements in the patterns of ordinary human conduct" (p. 444).

In other words, understanding the impact of technology in terms of affordances recognizes that humans are able to shape the meaning of technology, but also recognizes that the number of possible "readings" or interpretations of a device is limited. Hutchby further clarifies this point:

> "Does the aeroplane lend itself to the same set of possible interpretations as the bridge; and if not, why not? I suggest that the answer to this question is no. The reason is that different technologies possess different affordances, and these affordances constrain the ways that they can possibly be 'written' or 'read'… The affordances of an artefact are not things which impose

> themselves upon humans' actions with, around, or via that artefact. But they do set limits on what is *possible* to do with, around, or via the artefact… technological artefacts do not amount simply to what their users make of them; what is made of them is accomplished in the interface between human aims and the artefact's affordances" (pp. 447; 453).

An important assumption about affordances is that devices are in some way limited in what they can "do." An iPhone, for example, can be used to make phone calls, browse the web, or can even be thrown as a weapon, but it cannot physically transport you from one place to another (although it could help you plan a trip!). With so much talk about how ICTs shape human relations and social life, an important alternative question arises: are there some things which ICTs *cannot* do for human relations? Stated differently, are there some dimensions of human social life which fall outside the affordances of contemporary devices? If so, it would be important to know, because this would suggest that relying too extensively on ICTs to mediate our relations would be inadequate in some way.

Taking up the question of the affordances of ICTs for human relations demands consideration of what human relations *are*. When we talk about human relations, what do we mean? In this thesis, I argue that this theoretical starting point—the question "what *are* human relations"—is in many ways *the* question, inasmuch as our theoretical foundation shapes how we perceive the impact of ICTs on human relations. In this way, the question of the affordances of technology for human relations is similar to the debate over the affordances of modernization for community. For those who understand community as sociality bound to a particular space, modernization is a dangerous, atomizing force. On the other hand, for those who understand community as affective relations that are not necessarily bound to a physical location, modernization is seen as less of a threat.

To illustrate the importance of theoretical starting points in technology research, I examine and compare two distinct perspectives of social life. The first perspective I examine is called "Networked Individualism," which is characterized by an egocentric agent who creates and manages a social world that remains separate from his/her self. The second perspective I consider is the relational phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas, which presents a radically different view of social life. By bringing these two perspectives into dialogue, I aim to show that egocentric approaches of sociality such as networked individualism, while useful, miss some of the most meaningful dimensions of social life. Thus, inasmuch as network individualists ignore the limitations of their conclusions emerging from their theoretical beginnings, they risk overlooking important dimensions of sociality and perpetuating a reductive view of human existence that fails to capture the constraints and possibilities belonging to the affordances of ICTs for human relations.

Roadmap

The thesis is divided into four main chapters. In the first chapter, I review the theory of networked individualism and I examine how this theory carries implications for understanding the affordances of ICTs on human relations. In the second chapter I apply Martin Heidegger's conception of enframing to argue that networked individualism presents a dangerously limited view of the social world that is caught up in instrumental rationality. In the third chapter I present the relational phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas as an alternative view which explores dimensions of social experience that networked individualism does not seriously consider. I argue that Levinas's ethical relationalism is a good option for moving beyond the instrumental limitations of networked individualism. In the fourth chapter, I compare and contrast the implications of networked individualism and relational phenomenology for understanding the

impact of ICTs on human relations. Finally, I conclude with a brief summary of my arguments and a consideration of the implications for policy-makers and future research.

CHAPTER 1: THE THEORY OF NETWORKED INDIVIDUALISM

In this chapter I examine the theory of "networked individualism." Developed primarily by the sociologist Barry Wellman, networked individualism borrows concepts from social network analysis, social capital research, and theories of community transformation to explain human relations in contemporary life. Barry Wellman is widely recognized for his work on community (Wellman 1979; Wellman and Gulia 1999), the Internet (Wellman 2011; Wellman et al. 2003), and personal networks (Wellman 2001; Wellman, Carrington, and Hall 1997), and is the current director of NetLab at the University of Toronto. As a theory of technology and social life, networked individualism is worth investigating for at least two reasons: First, network individualism brings recent insights from technology scholarship to some of sociology's most persistent questions and provides a new way of understanding our highly-technological social life. Second, networked individualism has gained significant traction in recent years and has become a major theory for empirical research on technology, especially in research on virtual communities and personal networks. In 2012, Wellman coauthored the book *Networked: The New Social Operating System*, with Lee Rainie, the director of the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project. The book provides an outline of networked individualism and makes extensive use of Pew Research data to support its claims. Networked individualism has been used as a framework for understanding many different areas of social life, including education (Jones 2012; Jones, Ferreday, and Hodgson 2008), urban planning (Foth and Adkins 2006; Foth and Hearn 2007), work (Rainie and Wellman 2012), civil society (Friedland, Hove, and Rojas 2006), and family life (Kennedy and Wellman 2007). To avoid linguistically-awkward descriptors I refer to authors who write about networked individualism as "NI theorists." Readers should be aware that although networked individualism is a subset of network theory, the claims

of NI theorists do not necessarily represent the views of network theorists in general. Some of these differences will become more apparent later on.

At its most basic level, networked individualism understands human relations as interpersonal ties belonging to personal networks that are managed by an autonomous actor who relies extensively on information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Boase and Wellman 2006; Chua, Madej, and Wellman 2011; Rainie and Wellman 2012; Wellman 2001). According to NI theorists, this model of social life is a result of social changes that can be attributed to technological developments and cultural shifts in the 20th century. To begin my examination of networked individualism, I briefly review this historical account. As we will see, networked individualism often presents itself as an alternative to typical "community lost" narratives.

Modernization and the Decline of Traditional Place-Based Community

For well over a hundred years, social scientists and historians have been observing and recording the transformation of social life. Although their descriptions and interpretations vary widely, most agree that there has been a decline of a particular kind of community, namely the "traditional" or "pre-modern" community. Arguably the most famous depiction of the traditional community was provided by 19th and 20th century sociologist Ferdinand Tonnies (2002), who described the traditional community with the term *Gemeinschaft*, which he characterized as "intimate, private, and exclusive living together." *Gemeinschaft* was understood apart from *Gesellschaft*, which Tonnies described as an "artificial construction of an aggregate of human beings." Rainie and Wellman (2012) elaborate on this description, describing traditional communities as *bounded groups*. In traditional communities, they argue, people socialized in densely-knit groups that were bound to a local area. Everyone within the community had the same overlapping ties, and the group most often represented the entirety of one's social world.

Because of the solidarity and insularity of these groups, they also had strong social control and could easily command loyalty of their members. An individual's social world was thus homogenous and bound to a single group in a single place.

The decline of traditional, bounded communities coincided with the rise of the "modern" era, though different authors have emphasized different historical events in relation to this change. Herlihy (1997), for example, traces the roots of this change to the Black Death in Europe, which decimated the population and upset the social order, ushering an era of individuality and existential questioning. Alternatively, other authors point to the development of transportation and communication technologies, especially during the 19th and 20th centuries (Putnam 2001; Rainie and Wellman 2012; Wellman 2002b). According to this latter view, inventions such as the railroad, the telegraph, the telephone, the airplane, and eventually the Internet all helped weaken traditional group boundaries free individuals from the social constraints of bounded groups.

For many, the decline of traditional, bounded communities raised serious questions about modern social life. Some social scientists feared that the decline of traditional communities would create a society characterized by a mass of isolated individuals connected by little more than economic interest. Tonnies (2002), for example, feared the displacement of *Gemeinschaft* by the more impersonal *Gesellschaft.* Louis Wirth (1938), drawing on Tonnies, argued that the warm, nurturing setting of traditional communities was being replaced by a cold and impersonal "urbanism." Without the bonds of strong solidary communities, many scholars feared that social life would decline and degenerate to social isolation or "individualism," a concept famously hypothesized by Alexis De Tocqueville (1988). Empirical accounts of this individualism have been provided in more recently by Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton (2008), Putnam

(2001) and McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Brashears (2006). Robert Putnam's account of the decline of participation in bowling leagues and the rise of "bowling alone" has been especially influential among social scientists and community pundits alike.

Accounts of community decline and rising isolation and individualism have been compounded in recent years by accounts of the isolating tendencies of ICTs. Specifically, authors have argued that ICTs and the Internet make users lonelier and more depressed (Kraut, Patterson, Lundmark, Kiesler, Mukophadhyay, and Scherlis 1998), displace involvement in real life thereby creating loners and addicts (Nie and Erbring 2000), impoverish social interactions by reducing face-to-face contact (Nie 2001), and contribute to becoming more "socially disengaged" (Sigman 2009) and living "alone together" (Turkle 2012). The recurring image here is of a mass of "lonely individual[s], hunched over a computer or smartphone screen, avoiding… human interaction" (Rainie and Wellman 2012, p. 126), and is perhaps the most popular account of ICTs in popular media today. In this way, recent technological developments are seen as accelerating the trend toward increasingly higher levels of social isolation.

Boundless Communities

The pessimistic story of community decline has not gone without question. While some authors have argued that the decline of placed-based community is fraught with existential and moral danger, others suggest that the picture is not so stark. Bender (1982) for example, argues that although place-based communities are no longer the dominant mode of social organization, communities persist in less visible but equally meaningful and important forms. Central to his thesis is the decoupling of community and place. He writes that "community, which has taken many structural forms in the past, is best defined as a network of social relations marked by mutuality and emotional bonds" (p. 7). This decoupling has

allowed scholars to see community in all kinds of places, ranging from entire nations (Anderson 2006) to online communities (Rheingold 2000; Wellman and Gulia 1999) and personal networks (Chua, Madej, and Wellman 2009; Chua, Madej, and Wellman 2011; Wellman 2001; Wellman 2007). In sum, these authors argue that while there has indeed been a significant change in the way that we relate to one another, community is not "lost," because community is defined conceptually by affective relations rather than spatial limitations and face-to-face interactions.

Networked individualism takes this latter view, understanding community as something that is not tied to any particular location. The transformation NI theorists describe is not the shift from community to isolation, but rather, from bounded communities to *personal networks* (Chua, Madej, and Wellman 2011; Licoppe and Smoreda 2005; Petrovčič 2008; Wellman 2007; Wellman, Boase, and Chen 2002). While NI theorists admit that there has indeed been a "revolution," they argue that "communities continue to exist, except as spacially dispersed and differentiated personal networks rather than as neighborhoods or densely knit groups" (Rainie and Wellman 2012, p. 146). They argue that when thinking about the question of community and human relations, "it helps to think about communities as fluid personal networks, rather than as static neighborhood or family groups. For too long, the model of community has been the preindustrial village where people walked door to door, and all knew, supported, and surveilled one another. These bygone village groups have largely transmuted into multiple, fragmented personal networks connected by the individuals and households at their centers" (Rainie and Wellman 2012, p. 122). NI theorists do not deny that traditional forms of social organization such as families and bounded communities continue to exist, but they argue that these groups are more of a heuristic than an adequate explanation of

our social reality. They try to show that "people think they are in groups but they really are in networks" (Rainie and Wellman 2012, p. 34; Boase and Wellman, 2006). They affirm that thinking as a group has certain benefits, such as creating a stable environment including norms for mutual help, but they argue that "most people in developed countries do not operate in tightly bounded, densely knit, group-centered worlds, and much of the less-developed world also is networked. People have separate agendas and schedules in their homes, communities, and at work. They socialize with shifting sets of friends rather than being regulars at bars or bowling leagues; many work in multiple teams at work—and increasingly away from the office… In short, people live in fluid and changing networks that go well beyond groups" (Rainie and Wellman 2012, p. 36).

One of the advantages of this alternative community narrative is that it allows us to consider social change in a less deterministic and pessimistic view. NI theorists recognize that place-based communities are no longer the main model of social organization, but unlike pessimistic scholars of individualization who argue that the decline of place-based communities brings about isolation and social malaise, they argue that networks can adequately provide for the needs that were once taken-for-granted (and perhaps offer more). "The networked operating system gives people new ways to solve problems and meet social needs. It offers more freedom to individuals than people experienced in the past because now they have more room to maneuver and more capacity to act on their own" (Rainie and Wellman 2012, p. 9). In other words, although modern, networked individuals no longer rely on traditional groups as the foundation of social life, this does not mean that they lead isolated, hopeless lives. To use the oft-cited example from Putnam, while it may be true that fewer people belong to bowling leagues, Rainie and Wellman argue that rather than bowling alone, people belong to "shifting networks of

friends who bowl" (Rainie and Wellman 2012, p. 38).

This concept of personal communities and personal networks also allows NI theorists to reconsider the question of ICTs and social isolation. Equipped with the latest numbers from the Pew Research Center and their own collection of qualitative data, Rainie and Wellman (2012) repeatedly argue that, contrary to more pessimistic authors, ICTs are more beneficial than harmful for human relations. For example, they find that ICT users tend to have larger and more diverse networks and they meet with the people in their networks more frequently. They also note that ICT users tend to stay continually connected with their friends and family. These trends lead Rainie and Wellman to claim that ICTs *augment* rather than *replace* human relations. In this they are not alone—many other authors have reported similar findings, especially in relation to social capital (Amichai-Hamburger and Hayat 2011; Calabrese, Smoreda, Blondel, and Ratti 2011; Katz and Rice 2002; Täube 2004; Tillema, Dijst, and Schwanen 2010; Wang and Law 2007).

Nevertheless, the concepts of "virtual communities" and "personal" networks have come under attack over the years. Freie (1998), for example, argues that such communities are not authentic communities but "counterfeit communities" because they are based purely on the psychological needs of the members and demand no lasting commitment, and as such, fail to provide lasting groups of relations. Dreyfus (2008) makes similar arguments. Drawing on Kierkegaard's critique of the public sphere, he argues that the lack of commitment in online personal communities prevents them from generating the meaningfulness of a genuine agora or community. In response to these criticisms, Bakardjieva (2003) suggests that social scientists should leave behind the battle of "community" and consider the myriad of ways in which the Internet improves people's social lives. Similarly, for proponents of NI theorists, the question of

"authentic community" is a misguided question. They argue that the real question is not whether a person belongs to an "authentic community," but whether a person's model of social life adequately meets his/her social needs (Boase and Wellman 2006; Rainie and Wellman 2012; Wellman 2002a; Wellman, Boase, and Chen 2002).

To summarize, NI theorists argue that the current pattern of social life emerged as a result of the decline of bounded, place-based communities. In pre-modern times, spatially-bounded communities existed simply because they were the only practical way to organize social life. With the next town over a day's walk away, the borders of community were necessarily limited. Technological developments in transportation and communication, however, began to blur these strong divisions. Today, individuals can now take part in relationships and groups largely independent of space. ICTs connected to the Internet allow real-time communication, and 21st century transportation allows for speedy travel when in-person interaction is necessary or desired. The erosion of spatial boundaries coincided with a weakening of traditional group boundaries. Groups that once commanded complete loyalty and kept a tight control over who was in and who was out became more fluid and permeable. Individuals found that they could belong to *multiple* groups, instead of belonging one, local community. Unlike pessimistic authors of "community lost" narratives, NI theorists argue that community continues to exist in ways that is not limited by space. In particular, they argue that communities are better understood as loosely-knit, specialized interest groups that neither command nor expect lasting in-group loyalty.

Having articulated NI theorists' historical account of technological development and social change preceding the rise of networked individualism, I now turn to the central theoretical assertions of networked individualism itself.

The Theoretical Assumptions of Networked Individualism

For NI theorists, the key theoretical difference between traditional place-based sociality and contemporary social life is the level of freedom offered the individual. In traditional communities, individuals simply received their social worlds as ready-made, and they knew their role within it. When they acted in social settings, they did so as a member of a group with a specific group identity. Networked individuals, on the other hand, are understood as agents who are free and responsible to create their social world. As Rainie and Wellman put it, "the individual is at the autonomous center" (2012, p. 7). Elsewhere, Wellman (2007) says that "each of us is the center of our own universe" (p. 349). Similarly, Chua (2013) writes that "the theory of networked individualism predicts a situation of autonomous individuals matching roles to tasks in ways they see fit" (p. 622). As the autonomous center, networked individuals exist independently of their social relations rather than being constituted by them. They possess no ready-made script nor belong to any local neighborhood which can provide all of their needs. They may identify with certain groups, but they have no all-encompassing group identity.

This assertion of autonomy may seem surprising, given that network theory developed as a structuralist critique of individualistic variable sociology. Indeed, the driving insight of early network theory was that the traditional method of using individual-level variables was inferior to a network approach that took the structure of relationships as the primary causal variable. Among network theorists, however, there has always been disagreement regarding the question of structure and agency (Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994; Knox, Savage, and Harvey 2006; Smith 2010). While some authors make little room for individual agency and argue that individuals "are networked" (a structuralist determinist account), others argue that

individuals retain a certain degree of agency, or that "individuals network." In other words, for NI theorists, people are autonomous, meaning that they are individuals that stand apart from their social relations.

This assumption of individual autonomy can be seen in the way that NI theorists differentiate contemporary social life from pre-modern life in bounded communities. Consider, for example, the way Rainie and Wellman describe the network individualist era of human history:

> "This is the era of free agents and the spirit of personal agency. But it is not the World According to Me—it is not a world of autonomous and increasingly isolated individualists. Rather, it is the World According to the Connected Me, where people armed with potent technology tools can extend their networks far beyond what was possible in the past and where they face new constraints and challenges that are outgrowths of networked life. Those primed to take advantage of this reality are the ones who are motivated to share their stories and ideas and then invite conversation and feedback" (Rainie and Wellman 2012, p. 19).

This paragraph deserves some careful interpretation, because it initially may seem that Rainie and Wellman simultaneously declare and deny that we are autonomous agents. They write that "this is the era of free agents," but "it is not a world of autonomous… individualists." What does it mean to be free agents but not autonomous individualists? The confusion, I believe, arises because the paragraph contains both an ontological assertion and an empirical observation. The ontological assertion is that we are autonomous individuals, free to "take advantage of this reality." This assertion lies at the core of networked individualism, and sets it apart from strong structuralist approaches. We are beings who network, rather than beings who are networked. Our technology has enhanced our freedom to actively construct our social worlds. The empirical observation, then, is that although we are autonomous actors, we tend to use our autonomy to

network and stay connected to others. The claim that "it is not a world of autonomous and increasingly isolated individualists" is thus best understood not as an ontological description of human being, but an empirical description that counteracts any isolating tendency of ontological individualism.

Individual autonomy to construct the social world may lie at the heart of networked individualism, but this autonomy should not be understood as a complete and utter freedom. While NI theorists recognize the freedom of individual, they also give room for network constraints. It is clear, however, that these constraints are limited: "Within networks there is much possibility for individual agency and autonomously acting ties. People and ties are affected by their networks, *but only partially so*. People maneuver to form relationships and find support from them, ties often operate *without much constraint* from their environing networks, and clusters of ties within networks operate privately in domestic spaces than collectively in public places" (Wellman & Frank 2001, p. 18, emphasis added).

This idea of "limited constraints" represents a strong break from structural determinist network theories. While structural determinists are likely to argue that structure alone determines historical development, NI theorists see structure as having an influence that is ultimately subject to the reflexivity and autonomy of the individual. Constraints in this latter view are thus better understood as either contractual agreements that are freely chosen or normative patterns that have not yet been subject to reflexive critique. As such, NI theorists see agency and constraints on a continuum, with individuals in dense, bounded networks having less agency and individuals in loose networks having more:

> "[W]e assert that people who exist in a dense network of mutually reinforcing relations are likely to exhibit less active agency. This is because the duties of planning can be diffused throughout a group. This assertion is based on findings that dense networks lead to norms of

> reciprocity and information sharing (Uehara 1990; Wellman & Wortley 1990), while sparse networks indicate personal control of information (Freeman 1979; Burt 2005). [We also assert] that network size is associated with relative levels of agency. Individuals with larger networks are likely to maintain these networks through active planning and engagement. The fact that their networks are larger should be seen as products of their ability to actively maintain a large number of connections and preserve these connections across time-space (Boase et al. 2006)" (Carrasco, Hogan, Wellman, and Miller 2008, p. 568).

These constraints may be understood as the "costs" of belonging to the network. Belonging to a dense network such as a traditional, bounded community is said to involve high costs relating to high expectations of in-group loyalty. Personal networks under networked individualism, on the other hand, offer more freedom and are less demanding. Even so, the ties in personal networks are not free of constraints. According to NI theorists, networked individuals must fulfill social obligations—social norms and expectations—if they are to maintain viable network relations. Accepted social roles and social etiquette in particular limit the ways in which individuals can treat and use their ties. Boyfriends and girlfriends, for example, are expected to act a certain way in reverence to the relation—breaking these expectations is often grounds for breaking off the relationship. According to Chua (2013) "even as people build specialized systems of social support based on autonomous decisions, structural forces constrain the context within which those autonomous decisions are made" (p. 603). For every tie there is usually some level of obligation that needs to be met if the tie is to persist.

The freedom of networked individuals is thus not a complete and radical autonomy, but a freedom to shape and structure one's social world according to one's personal desires. Returning to the NI theorists' historical account, as social life shifted away from taken-for-granted group-centric sociality and the individual became more aware of his/her freedom, the individual also

became more personally responsible for learning the skills and doing the work to secure the benefits of social life.

> "The networked operating system gives people new ways to solve problems and meet social needs. It offers more freedom to individuals than people experienced in the past because now they have more room to maneuver and more capacity to act on their own. At the same time, the networked individualism operating system requires that people develop new strategies and skills for handling problems. [Networked individuals] must devote more time and energy to practicing the art of networking than their ancestors did. Except in emergencies, they can no longer passively let the village take care of them and control them. They must actively network. They need to expend effort and sometimes money to maintain their ties near and far; choose whether to phone, visit, or electronically connect with others; remember which members of their network are useful for what sorts of things (including just hanging out); and forge useful alliances among network members who might not previously have known each other. In short, networked individualism is both socially liberating and socially taxing" (Rainie and Wellman 2012, p. 9).

The freedom of networked individuals is thus a freedom to choose network relations to which the self becomes obligated, rather than a freedom to reap any desired end without cost. However, in order for networked individualism to make any logical sense, these constraints cannot supersede the limits of an individual's autonomy. Put another way, networked individualism must at least allow for the *possibility* that individuals can be completely isolated as individuals outside of any network, free of any social constraints or obligations. If this were not the case, then the vision of an "era of free agents" would merely be an illusion, wherein individuals *think* they are free to construct their social worlds but are in reality determined by some outside force. For this reason, the ontological assertion of personal autonomy is the foundation without which networked individualism could not exist. Without this assertion,

networked individualism would be indistinguishable from structural determinist accounts. Again, according to NI theorists, we are fundamentally beings who network, rather than beings who are networked.

NI theorists's historical account of the development of networked individualism raises questions about the status of this ontological claim. What do Rainie and Wellman mean when they say that "*This* is the era of free agents and the spirit of personal agency"? Are they implying that the ontology of human beings fundamentally changed, meaning we are new and different creatures than we once were? I do not read them as going this far. Elsewhere, Rainie and Wellman describe the network "revolution" in terms of a "discovery." They write that "Networks have always been with us, although they are more prevalent now and we are certainly paying more attention to them" (56). NI theorists have made similar claims in other places (Chua, Madej, and Wellman 2011; Wellman 2001). In other words, autonomous individualism did not suddenly spring into being as a new human essence, but is rather a feature of human being that has always existed but that has only recently been able to reach a more full expression through networked individualism.

The assertion of personal autonomy leads to questions about motivation. If individuals are truly free and autonomous, why do they choose to enter into social relations? In pre-modern times, this could be explained somewhat in terms of strong social norms. Individuals entered into social relations because they just took the world for granted. When those norms and patterns break down and autonomous individuals discover their freedom, however, how are social relations justified? The implicit assumption within networked individualism is that social relations are to be understood primarily in terms of capital and profit for the autonomous self. In this they are indebted to social capital theory. As Lin (1999) candidly puts it,

> "The premise behind the notion of social capital is rather simple and straightforward:

investment in social relations with expected returns. This general definition is consistent with various renditions by all scholars who have contributed to the discussion (Bourdieu, 1983/1986; Bourdieu, 1980; Burt, 1992; Coleman, 1988; Coleman, 1990; Erickson, 1995; Erickson, 1996; Flap, 1994; Flap, 1991; Lin, 1982; Lin, 1995; Portes, 1998; Putnam, 1993; Putnam, 1995a). Individuals engage in interactions and networking in order to produce profits" (pp. 30-31).

Compare's Lin's admission with Rainie and Wellman's description of networked individualism:

> "Different networks operate in different ways. Many provide havens: a sense of belonging and being helped. Many provide bandages: emotional aid and services that help people cope with the stresses and strains of their situations. Still others provide safety nets that lessen the effects of acute crises and chronic difficulties. They all provide social capital: interpersonal resources not only to survive and thrive, but also to change situations (houses, jobs, spouses) or to change the world or at least their neighborhood (organizing major political activity, local school board politics)… In a world of networked individuals, those who engage in the mutual exchange of intangible or mundane resources have the potential to thrive. These individuals will seek support and seek to provide support. Further, those individuals who are able to balance relationships with people in the various sectors of their social networks—kin, friends, neighbors, associates, and workmates— are better positioned to receive both broad and specialized support" (Rainie and Wellman 2012, p. 19).

According to these NI theorists, effectively building and maintaining personal networks provides individuals with a stable supply of social capital. This capital can be used however the self sees fit; social capital in this view is merely the power "to change situations." Thus, to answer the question of the motivation to network, individuals are indeed autonomous and have their freedom to construct their social world as they see fit, but they tend to network and socialize in order to build up stores of social capital that help them meet their personal needs and

desires. This capital is not necessarily used in selfish ways—social capital can be and is often leveraged for altruistic ends—but it is nevertheless understood as an instrument: a power , or resource to be used by the self in the pursuit of its own aims.

The assumed instrumental motivation for social life carries implications for how NI theorists understand the ontology of human relations. Simply put, NI theorists understand relations as objects that are separate from the self and that can be instrumentally leveraged to reach some desired end. In this way, networked individualism relies on the classic Cartesian subject-object divide to explain human relations. Using the language of network theory, autonomous individuals forge "ties," with other individuals. These ties can be "strong," "weak," or "absent," and they provide different benefits accordingly (Granovetter 1973). Rainie and Wellman (2012) add that ties "vary in (1) quality —for example, whether the relation provides emotional aid or companionship; (2) quantity —how much emotional aid and how frequent the companionship; (3) multiplexity —the bundling of relationships in a tie, such as friends who provide emotional aid and frequent companionship; and (4) symmetry —for example, which types of people who get emotional aid do not give it back" (p. 48).

As objects separate from an egocentric self, ties are forged and used by the self. Significantly, ties can be made or broken at any time. Breaking ties changes an individual's network, but it does not fundamentally alter the subjectivity of the individual because the tie is an object that stands apart from the fundamental constitution of the individual. Individuals who dispassionately make and break ties certainly risk backlash from people who do not enjoy being treated as disposable objects (McEwen and Wellman 2013; O'Connell 2012), but the ontological framework assumed by NI theorists takes ties and networks to be objects that do not fundamentally alter the freedom of the autonomous individual. In this way, ties are instruments

in the same way that a hammer is an instrument. Both social ties and hammers are objects which can be leveraged as instruments for bringing to pass some desired end of the self. Ties differ from hammers inasmuch as they require a different kind of work and can be leveraged for a wider variety of ends, but social ties do not alter one's individuality any more than a hammer does.

Another significant feature of network ties is that they are abstract entities that stand apart from physical reality. Ties may be objects in the sense that they are recognized and leveraged by autonomous individuals, but they are not seen or handled in an empirical sense. Contemporary social networking software and websites do make ties visible (Facebook includes a button to "see" a friendship between two linked members), but the tie itself is merely an abstraction used to establish a path for social exchanges. According to Slife (2004): "Objectification can only occur through abstraction. The objects must be abstracted from their concrete contexts, because in their fundamental realness – in their practical and concrete realities – all things are ontologically related to their context and can qualitatively change as their contexts change. If a person dying of frigid temperatures, for instance, discovers a cache of wooden tennis rackets, the rackets are firewood. Only an abstraction from this deadly situation allows the person to identify the fuel that provides life-giving warmth as something used in a game. All things, in this sense, are concretely dependent upon, rather than independent of, their contexts" (Slife 2004, p. 159)." As abstractions, ties can be called up at any time to perform a desired task. Stated differently, the theorization of ties as abstractions, as objects, makes possible the theorization of such ties as instruments to be used by individuals to construct their personal networks.

As abstract objects, ties carry particular meanings that allow effective instrumentalization. The meaning of a tie is created by the autonomous holder of the tie, who

gives the tie a specialized purpose. Often, purposes are aligned with particular social roles. "Personal communities are usually specialized, with different network members helping in various ways. The exception is spouses who supply each other with many types of support. Friends are valued as confidants and social companions. Neighbors and coworkers are conveniently suited for handling unexpected emergencies because their nearness enables them to react quickly with goods and services. Parents, adult children, and in-laws often provide emotional and long-term support: financial aid, emotional aid, large and small services such as childcare, health care, and home repairs" (Rainie and Wellman, 2012, pp. 135-136). Once ties are adequately labeled, they can be called upon to perform a particular task. [1]

As objects that are instrumental in bringing about the desired ends, the main variable affecting the quality of one's social life is the skillfulness and work of the networked individual. Ties require work from the self if the self is to reap any benefits. Networked individuals who don't have strong networks—networks characterized by a large number of ties that provide a wide variety of resources and who are able and willing to help when in need—are said to lack the requisite skills or effort. This point will become especially relevant when examining the social affordances of ICTs according to networked individualism.

In light of these developments, let us reinterpret the networked individualism narrative of the social network revolution. First, NI theorists see humans as fundamentally autonomous and egocentric individuals, meaning that among other things, they have the freedom to create and manage their social world. Although humans have always used this freedom to a certain extent (networks have always been with us), personal autonomy was greatly limited and

[1] Parallels can also be drawn here with Heidegger's concept of "present-at-hand." According to Heidegger, this is a way of engaging the world in terms of abstractions and theories. Significantly, Heidegger argues that this is not the primary way we live, but a way we only live when something goes wrong or breaks. See: Heidegger, Martin. 1996. *Being and time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit*: State University of New York Press.

unknown during much of human history. During this pre-modern era, humans lived in spatially-bound, tightly-knit communities. As transportation and communication technologies developed, spatial barriers began to erode. Similarly, weakening social barriers permitted more flexibility for social life. These changes led individuals to more fully discover their freedom to create their own human relations. The collapse of traditional place-based communities left individuals at risk, however. Individuals still had needs and desires which were best fulfilled by relying on others. Rather than lapsing into isolation, however, individuals began relying more and more on networks as a way to live with others and meet their personal needs. Networks became the ideal solution to this problem inasmuch as they allowed individuals to use their personal autonomy while simultaneously providing social needs. Individuals still had to meet certain obligations in order ensure that they reaped the benefits of social ties, but the shift to networks allowed these obligations to be freely accepted or rejected.

At this point, we can summarize the main assertions of networked individualism as a theoretical framework:

1. The self is an autonomous and egocentric agent
2. As an autonomous and egocentric agent, the self forges, manages, and uses relations/ties to create their own personal networks
3. Relations are abstractions with specialized meanings that exist independently of the self and which are instrumental in providing the self with capital
4. Social norms and expectations constrain the way in which the self forges, manages and uses ties, but the self is free to choose which ties (and subsequently, which constraints) to develop.

The Affordances of ICTs According to Networked Individualism

Having articulated NI theorists' view of social reality, we are ready to turn to the question

of the social affordances of ICTs. I argue here that using networked individualism as a theoretical framework carries significant implications for how we understand the affordances of ICTs on human relations.

Informed by the assertions discussed above, NI theorists see the impact of technological development primarily in terms of connectivity and social capital. They discuss how the social network revolution was enhanced by the developments of modern communication and transportation technologies. In the 19th century, the barriers of time and space began to break down with the arrival of the telegraph and the railroad. Messages that once took days or weeks to deliver could now be delivered in seconds, and voyages which were once impractical or dangerous became relatively easy. These revolutionary inventions were soon followed by the telephone and the automobile, and in time, the airplane. Relationships between individuals could now be easily sustained across huge distances, and entrepreneurs could work with useful connections virtually anywhere on the globe. The place-based community, once a necessity, became optional—individuals could now build their social worlds however they saw fit.

Continuing the narrative, NI theorists argue that the arrival of the Internet in the late 20th century further strengthened the network revolution and eventually became a primary resource for managing social networks. The final technological development for networked individualism came with the mobile revolution, however, which allowed individuals to engage their networks regardless of time or space. The contemporary smartphone is the apex device for the networked individual, combining the possibilities of the Internet with the mobility of the cell phone.

Why are contemporary ICTs, including smart phones, so significant for NI theorists? Recall that networked individuals are free and responsible to create and manage their social worlds. ICTs and the Internet are a critical resource for networked individuals because they are

exceedingly adept at helping individuals perform the work of building and maintaining social networks. Truthfully, it might be said that the existence of mobile ICTs made networked individualism a feasible reality in the first place. Manuel Castells (2002) predicted the importance of these mobile devices for networked individuals, saying, “The projected development of the wireless Internet increases the chances of personalized networking to a wide range of social situations, thus enhancing the capacity of individuals to rebuild structures of sociability from the bottom up” (p. 132). Without the corresponding technological developments that make networking more efficient and easy, life as a networked individual might be more similar to previous generations, in that place would continue to have more relevance.

For NI theorists, ICTs and the Internet are integral tools for the networked individual for several interrelated reasons. First, ICTs and the Internet are, by definition, ways to overcome spatial and temporal boundaries (Friedland and Boden 1994; Giddens 2013). Communications that originally took days or weeks can now be transmitted instantly, without needing to move one's body more than a few finger motions. For social relations, this means that individuals can easily maintain relations with others outside of their limited geographical area. Free from the limitations of time and space, individuals can thus procure and maintain relations based on interest and need, rather than geographic fate. To be sure, humans have maintained relations with individuals across chasms of time and space for millenia, but the rapidity of contemporary technology allows for distant others to play more central roles in the lives of individuals and empowers the individual to network according to one's liking.

Second, the Internet offers networked individuals a virtually infinite resource for establishing ties and building social capital. In seconds, a savvy networked individual can bond with others online with similar interests and needs or consult experts that can help with one's

personal dilemmas. With the rise of social media and social networking sites, the possibilities for social capital continue to grow. Furthermore, in addition to serving as a database for forging new ties, the Internet also makes it easy for networked individuals to maintain existing ties and coordinate social action.

Third, the proliferation of mobile devices, including smart phones, allows networked individuals to remain constantly connected to their personal networks. As long as the networked individual has built and maintained a sufficiently healthy social network, he/she is able to draw on the capital of the network at virtually any time, and in any place. On the flip side, mobile devices allow the networked individual to offer help and maintain network ties at any time and place.

In sum, ICTs and the Internet are important for NI theorists because they free networked individuals from the constraints of time and space; provide infinite resources for forging ties; and effectively place the social world at one's personal command. NI theorists have described these advantages at length (Line, Jain, and Lyons 2011; McEwen 2010; Rainie and Wellman 2012; Rheingold 2012; Tillema, Dijst, and Schwanen 2010). These capacities enhance the freedom of networked individuals to create their social networks according to their interests and desires, and they also make it easier for networked individuals to do the work of managing the personal network.

We arrive at this theoretical understanding of the affordances of ICTs for human relations when we begin with a framework of networked individualism. For this reason, Rainie and Wellman are highly supportive of ICTs. Indeed, they go so far as to say that "thriving" in the 21st century will be largely dependent on one's ability to effectively network using the ICTs which are available. They write:

"The underlining theme of this book is that it is a networked world, and that being networked is not

> so scary. Rather, it provides opportunities for people to thrive if they know how to maneuver in it. Arguably, the emerging divide in this world is not the 'digital divide' but the 'network divide.' Technology continues to spread through populations, so the emerging need is for people to learn how to cultivate their networks—and to get out from the cocoon of their bounded groups" (p. 255)

In other words, networked individualism and ICTs present opportunities and challenges for social life, and those who skillfully manage and exploit their networks will reap the rewards while avoiding the negative possibilities (such as isolation). In fact, many authors have argued that the true "digital divide" is a difference of skill, and that inequality is reproduced with ICTs because technology users have varying degrees of skill in using their devices (Hampton 2010; Hargittai 2008; Hargittai and Hinnant 2008; Hargittai and Shafer 2006; Howard, Busch, and Sheets 2010; Rheingold 2012). At the end of *Networked*, Rainie and Wellman provide a list of things that network individuals ought to know and do in order to ensure these desirable outcomes. This list includes networking advice ("develop meaningful new ties as you go along and be especially alert to reaching into new social circles that serve your purposes"), ethical advice ("invest in existing relationships via the Golden Rule so that help will be there when needed"), psychological advice ("segment your identity"), and pragmatic advice ("manage time well; multitask strategically"), which all fall under a general category they call "networking literacy." Their bottom line is that individuals who are "network literate" will be able to have healthy social lives that meet their personal needs.

Of course, network individuals are not completely free to network any way they like if they want to be successful—they are still subject to the sanctioning power of social norms. The second implication for the proliferation of ICTs for networked individuals is that new opportunities to network will come into conflict with existing norms of social etiquette.

> "The old rules of etiquette and courtesy are reconfiguring in this new environment that enables users to conduct their private business in public places… As with earlier technologies, societies are still adjusting to what is acceptable behavior while using mobile devices" (Rainie and Wellman 2012, pp. 105-106).

In many ways, evolving social norms of ICT use inform the possibilities and definitions of "networking literacy." According to these NI theorists, networking within the bounds of these constraints is an important skill for networked individuals to develop.

To summarize, when we look at technological developments with a lens of networked individualism we find that ICTs impact human relations by 1) enhancing the freedom and ability of networked individuals to create and manage their social world and 2) creating social conflict by challenging and reconfiguring existing norms regarding what is socially acceptable behavior. For NI theorists, the implication is that maintaining healthy and viable human relations is a matter of developing skills and knowledge associated with "networking literacy." When seen in this light, it becomes clear why these authors believe that ICTs are generally positive developments—these devices can greatly enhance our relations without fundamentally altering them or reducing their quality.

NI theorists offer an attractive account of ICTs and human relations, but it should be noted that the conclusions of these authors rely on a particular set of theoretical underpinnings. Their claims that ICTs "enhance" and "augment," and are "beneficial" to human relations ultimately hinge on the ontological understanding of human relations discussed above. Whether we agree with the proponents of networked individualism that ICTs are mostly beneficial for human relations will depend on whether we agree with their particular understanding of social life and human relations. In the next chapter, I suggest that the assumptions of networked individualism as discussed above are limited in significant ways.

CHAPTER 2: LIMITATIONS OF NETWORKED INDIVIDUALISM

As a theory of social life, networked individualism understands human relations as social ties which are managed by the self and which provide the self with standing reserves of social capital. NI theorists argue that with the right skillset and a certain amount of work, healthy networks of relationships can be established which effectively meet the ends and goals of egocentric agents. With this framework, ICTs are seen as having a positive impact on human relations, inasmuch as they allow individuals to network more efficiently and effectively. We are left to wonder, however, whether networked individualism is an adequate account of social life. Could it be that there are certain dimensions of human relations which cannot be described in terms of "ties" and "capital," and which cannot be made available and called on with skills and work? In this chapter I take up this question using Martin Heidegger's work on *enframing* (1993). With the idea of enframing Heidegger seeks to show how modern technology reduces the world to a store of standing resources for the self thereby covering over alternative ways of knowing and being. Extending this concept, I argue that networked individualism forwards the enframing of the world that Heidegger describes.

Heidegger and Enframing

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger published an influential essay in 1954 entitled "The Question Concerning Technology." In this essay, Heidegger attempts to describe what he believes to be the "essence" of modern technology. He coins the word "enframing" to describe this essence. Before we can talk about enframing, however, we must understand something about Heidegger's understanding of truth. According to Heidegger, what normally counts as truth in the western world has been strictly limited to abstract knowledge and facts. Heidegger sees this as a dangerous limitation that we have inherited from modern philosophy. Contrary to this limited

conception, Heidegger argues that truth is better understood as 'revealing,' which goes beyond abstract knowledge and embraces all the ways in which we can relate to things in the world. As beings-in-the-world, we reveal the truth about the objects around us by using and relating with them, rather than sitting back and thinking about them. An object in the world presents itself to us on its own terms, and the truth which is revealed to us is dependent on our orientation or attitude. Consider an example of a cathedral. To an atheist, the cathedral might be revealed as a beautiful structure to be admired for aesthetic and architectural merit. To a believer, on the other hand, the church might be revealed as a sacred place of worship. Paradoxically, both are valid truths or revealings; both belong to the Being of the Cathedral, which reveals itself in different ways to actors with different orientations.

When Heidegger writes about the implications of modern technology, he writes with an understanding that technology is itself a way of revealing the world. What concerns Heidegger is not the machines themselves, but a particular human orientation that drives the development and use of modern technology which reveals the world in a limited, destructive way. Heidegger calls this human orientation "enframing," which he says "is nothing technological, nothing on the order of a machine. It is the way in which the real reveals itself as standing reserve" (p. 312). According to Heidegger, enframing—this human orientation by which the world is revealed as a standing reserve of exploitable resources—is the essence of modern technology.

Heidegger provides several examples of the way in which modern technology reveals the world in this limited way. In the following example, he compares the old technology of the windmill to modern extractive industries:

> "What is modern technology? It too is a revealing. Only when we allow our attention to rest on this fundamental characteristic does that which is new in modern technology show itself to us.
>
> "And yet the revealing that holds sway throughout modern technology does not unfold into a

> bringing-forth in the sense of poiesis. The revealing that rules in modern technology is a challenging [Herausfordern], which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy that can be extracted and stored as such. But does this not hold true for the old windmill as well? No. Its sails do indeed turn in the wind; they are left entirely to the wind's blowing. But the windmill does not unlock energy from the air currents in order to store it. In contrast, a tract of land is challenged into the putting out of coal and ore. The earth now reveals itself as a coal mining district, the soil as a mineral deposit. The field that the peasant formerly cultivated and set in order [bestellte] appears differently than it did when to set in order still meant to take care of and to maintain. The work of the peasant does not challenge the soil of the field. In the sowing of the grain it places the seed in the keeping of the forces of growth and watches over its increase. But meanwhile even the cultivation of the field has come under the grip of another kind of setting-in-order, which sets upon [stellt] nature. It sets upon it in the sense of challenging it. Agriculture is now the mechanized food industry. Air is now set upon to yield nitrogen, the earth to yield ore, ore to yield uranium, for example; uranium is set upon to yield atomic energy, which can be released either for destruction or for peaceful use" (p. 309).

When Heidegger refers to poiesis he refers to a particular kind of revealing that is open to generating previously unknown truths about being. The windmill allows for this kind of revealing because although it uses the power of the wind, it allows the wind to be more than this use. The modern extractive industries, by contrast, challenge nature to be nothing more than the standing reserve we desire. In perhaps a more poignant example, Heidegger refers to the Rhine River to show how technology transforms our orientation to the world. With the erection of a hydroelectric dam, Heidegger says that "even the Rhine itself appears as something at our command" (p. 309). He goes so far as to say that even the tourism industry which is built to appreciate the natural beauty of the Rhine transforms the natural world into a source of profit.

The enemy for Heidegger is thus the human drive to obtain a quantifiable and controllable knowledge of the world that inspires humanity to adopt an orientation that views the

world as a set of raw materials or "standing-reserve", an orientation which perhaps culminates in modern science and modern technology. Enframing is thus a threat to humanity because it is an all-encompassing worldview that leaves nothing untouched—it seeks to bring all under its control. It reveals the world as a standing reserve, and it tends to preclude other revelations. Heidegger describes the threat as follows: “The threat to humanity does not come in the first instance from the potentially lethal machines and apparatuses of technology. The actual threat has already afflicted humanity in its essence. The rule of enframing threatens humanity with the possibility that it could be denied to him to enter into a more original revealing and hence to experience the call of a more primal truth.” (p. 314)

What, then, is threatened by enframing? Everything, essentially. The natural world is threatened by encroaching industry and all the byproducts of modern society. *Being* and *truth* are threatened because enframing hides alternative ways of being and knowing the world. Humanity itself is threatened because, as Heidegger says, even humans may come to be seen as one more standing reserve. Regarding this last point, we can see horrifying examples of enframing when humans are seen as mere resources to be used as parts of the national war machine. Indeed, Bauman’s (2001) sociological account of what made the Holocaust possible could be understood in terms of a targeted enframing of particular marginalized groups. It the case of the Holocaust, however, the Jews and other victims were enframed not as resources, but as “impurities” to be removed.

Salvation

Many authors, including the preeminent technology scholar Bruno Latour (1999), have criticized Heidegger for being a pessimistic technological determinist. As Kochan (2010) points out, however, “while Heidegger was indeed deeply critical of modern technology, he was not a

technological determinist. He neither took technology to be an insuperable force that enslaves humans as its instrumental puppets, nor maintained that there is no way out of the predicament into which modernity has brought us. Indeed, Heidegger writes that the central aim of his analysis of technology is 'to prepare a free relation to it.'" (p. 584). Logically this makes sense—if Heidegger believed that technology were an insuperable force, why would he waste his time writing so much about it (unless he were merely trying to ride the wave and eke out a profit)?

Heidegger finds inspiration in the words of the German poet, Friedrich Hölderlin, who penned the following lines:

"But where danger is, grows / The saving power also."

According to Heidegger, although enframing itself is a destructive force, if we *reflect* on our power to enframe, we will come to the realization that we, as humans, are part of the coming-into-being or revealing of the world, and are thus responsible as caretakers of Being. The purpose of his critique is to provide exactly that reflection on enframing, and thus loosen the grip of enframing and allow for alternative ways-of-being and revealing.

This hope is rooted in the fact that even though humanity's orientation toward the world is one of enframing and exploitation, the primal relation in which the physical world presents itself on its own terms persists. Put differently, despite humanity's tendency to see the world in terms of resources to control, the world continues to exist in its fullness of being, and continues to carry the possibilities of other ways of revealing. Modern food production, for example, takes pigs as resources for human consumption and treats them accordingly. Despite this reduction, however, pigs continue to be pigs, and there remains the possibility to adopt a new orientation that reveals the pigs as something more than a standing resource. Again, the purpose of Heidegger's critique is not to predict a grim and unalterable future of humanity, but to show us

how to establish a "free relation" to our technology, meaning a relation in which we are constantly critical and constantly questioning in order to become more open to that which might be revealed to us.

Networked Individualism as an Example of Enframing

ICTs, I suggest, are also subject to this enframing described by Heidegger, and the theory of networked individualism is evidence of this enframing. Recall that according to networked individualism, individuals are autonomous and egocentric agents who have the freedom and obligation to manage their social world. They are in a never-ending quest to shore up their stores of social capital to be used when needed, and to do this, they create specialized ties which can be drawn on to meet their desired ends. To make this work more efficient and effective, networked individuals rely heavily on ICTs which allow them to transcend the limitations of time and space. Just as a hydroelectric dam brought the Rhine River under Germany's command, ICTs more fully bring human relations under the control of the self. In other words, enframing as Heidegger describes is alive and well, and we have reached the point that Heidegger feared, where even humanity is taken as a standing reserve. The theory of networked individualism is an orientation toward the social world which takes human beings as standing reserves of social capital for the ego and which promotes and justifies certain attitudes and behaviors that hide alternative ways of perceiving human relations. To understand why this is so, we need to look no further than NI theorists' own descriptions of networked individualism and their tips on how to "thrive as a networked individual." The message is clear: network and build relationships however you can so that you can have the help you need to meet your personal needs.

We do not need to deny that it might be a good thing for individuals to develop personal networks in order to sustain this critique. Heidegger would not deny that hydroelectric dams are

useful tools in the world. Similarly, networked individualism shows how individuals might channel capital to solve real problems. This ability has been magnified in recent years with the invention of crowdfunding platforms (Gass 2011). Again, the concern for Heidegger is not that the instrumental way of revealing the world is invalid, but that it sets itself up as a fundamental Truth of the world and overlooks alternative ways of knowing and being. An *enframed* world is one that is so enamored with its ability to control and create resources that it crowds out the possibility of our being in the world any other way. NI theorists have taught us that human relations can be understood in terms of resources for the self, but is this the entire truth of human relations? Heidegger would say *no*. Heidegger's goal and mine as well is to free our devices from the limiting orientation of enframing that reveals us solely as autonomous individuals and overlooks alternative, and perhaps more meaningful, understandings of human relations.

In order to break out of the enframing of networked individualism, I turn to the ethical phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas, whose account of human relations is radically different from the egocentric theory of networked individualism described above. As I will show, by using an alternative theory of human relations that is truly *relational* and does not reduce human relations to objects which are under the command of the self, we open up new and rich possibilities for studying the social impact of ICTs. Significantly, we begin to see that there may be more to human relations than what can be subjected to the maximizing powers of technology.

CHAPTER 3: EMMANUEL LEVINAS AND THE ETHICAL RELATION

In the previous chapter I suggested that networked individualism is an example of the destructive, enframing essence of modern technology. In this chapter, I offer an alternative view of human relations, which is hidden by the enframing essence of networked individualism.

Emmanuel Levinas

Emmanuel Levinas was a twentieth-century French philosopher with Lithuanian Jewish ancestry. Although he was spared the worst of the German targeting of the Jews during World War II, he did spend time in a prisoner of war camp, and many of his family were killed at the hands of SS troops, including his father and brother. These and other experiences eventually helped shape his life's work, which can be seen as an ethical critique of the work of other phenomenologists, including Martin Heidegger. The ethical and relational phenomenology articulated by Levinas has been increasingly influential in social science, visible in areas including law (Manderson 2006), health (Clifton-Soderstrom 2003; Lindh, Severinsson, and Berg 2007), psychology (Clegg and Slife 2005; Kunz 1998; Slife and Richardson 2008), sociology (Elliott 2003; Lash 1996; Raffel 2002), therapy (Larner 2011; Larner, Rober, and Strong 2004), education (Child, Williams, Birch, and Boody 1995; Standish 2001), feminism (Chanter 2001; Perpich 2008), and communication and technology (Boothroyd 2009; Miller 2012; Pinchevski 2005), among others.

Levinas's philosophical project is a good alternative to networked individualism because it offers an almost diametrically opposed perspective of human relations. Whereas the relations of networked individuals are objects that are consciously created and managed, Levinas argues that relations are received immediately as gifts upon encountering another person, before the self can give any kind of approval. This is a key point, but one that can be easily missed because

network theorists and Levinas both describe their approaches as "relational." The difference between network relationality and Levinasian relationality can be understood as a difference between "weak" and "strong" relationality. According to Slife (2004): "Unlike weak relationality, where essentially self-contained objects must cross time and space to influence one another through traditional cause and effect, strong relationality assumes that objects are instantaneously or even simultaneously present with other objects. They are not only influential but also constitutive of the very nature of beings or events" (p. 160). "[R]elationships are not just the interactions of what was originally nonrelational; relationships are relational 'all the way down' (p. 159). Stated differently, for Levinas, relations are not something that one *has,* but something that defines who one *is*.

Distinguishing between weak and strong relationality casts new insight on the strong distinction between traditional community and networked individualism. Whereas NI theorists believe that increased reflexivity and personal autonomy signified a radical change in social life, Levinas would argue that traditional community and networked individualism are two sides of the same coin. This is so because both traditional and modern accounts of human life rely on "weak" relationality to explain human relations. Whether authors fear the rise of isolated individualism as a result of community collapse or champion newly-found agency, both views rely on an account of human relations that takes them as objects apart from the self. Were this not so, individuals could neither be isolated without relations nor free to choose them. This difference between Levinas and other approaches should become clearer later on.

One way of understanding Levinas's project is to see it as a phenomenological account of what it is like to encounter another person. By phenomenological, I refer to a particular approach that stands in contrast to traditional theory-driven empirical research. According to Knapp

(forthcoming):

> "Phenomenology is less a theory about the social world than an investigative approach that seeks to further understanding through highly reflective and careful analysis of experience. As the study of "phenomena," or the study of that which appears or that which "shows itself," phenomenology is a profoundly non-theoretical approach to social science. Rather than begin with concepts, the construction of variables, and the goal of explanation, phenomenology proposes to take up the ontological question, "What is X (the phenomena we seek to study)?", most directly: through examination of how it is experienced. Phenomenology is therefore to be understood more as an investigative approach that seeks to first describe rather than explain human phenomena."

In the case of Levinas, he begins by asking what/who I encounter when I encounter another person. This question may appear odd and perhaps out of place, but it is the critical question for Levinas, and as we will see, his entire project emerges from this initial question. To begin, it is helpful to compare the encounter with another person to what Levinas calls the "natural attitude." According to Levinas, before I encounter another person, I live my life and attend to my needs by totalizing objects around me. "Totalize" here refers to understanding objects conceptually as things that fulfill my wants and needs. The food I eat, the tools I use, the shelter I seek—I totalize these things by comprehending them in terms of usefulness for myself, which allows me to control my life and consume at will. According to most social theories, including networked individualism, the encounter with another person is simply another relation of totality: it is an encounter with some*thing*, meaning that the ego encounters the other as some kind of object that is known in some way. Even Heidegger, despite his strong critique of instrumentalism, struggled to break out of this egocentric way of understanding human relations. Says Levinas: "The being of animals is a struggle for life. A struggle for life without ethics. It is a question of might. Heidegger says at the beginning of Being and Time that Dasein is a being

who in his being is concerned for this being itself. That's Darwin's idea: the living being struggles for life. The aim of being is being itself. However, with the appearance of the human – and this is my entire philosophy – there is something more important than my life, and that is the life of the other" (Levinas 1988, p. 172)

Levinas agrees that we can and do relate to one another as things, but he asserts that the primordial encounter with the other is an encounter with some*one*, rather than some*thing*. Levinas says that I encounter the other in conceptual terms as something—as a professor or a student or as someone who dresses in a certain way or says certain things—but that this encounter is secondary to the primordial encounter of the "Other" as wholly other. What does it mean to be "wholly other?" First, it refers to the fact that "the Other" is a particular other, rather than some abstract notion of another person. As a particular other, the Other, or this particular person, is irreplaceable and completely unique. Second, "wholly other" refers to what Levinas calls the "alterity" of the other. Alterity refers to difference or otherness, but alterity here is not simply a difference of attributes or knowable traits. "[B]efore any attribute, you are other than I, other otherwise, absolutely other! And it is this alterity, different from the one which is linked to attributes, that is your alterity. This alterity is not justifiable logically; it is logically indiscernible. The identity of the I is not the result of any knowledge whatsoever: I find myself without looking for myself. You are you and I am I. This cannot be reduced to the fact that we differ because of our bodies or because of the color of our hair, or by the place we occupy in space." (Levinas and Robbins 2001, p. 49). Put another way, to encounter the Other is to encounter some*one* rather than some*thing,* meaning it is to encounter an Other who is radically different than me and who is not reducible to any amount of conceptual knowledge.

Consider the dramatic contrast between Levinas's concept of alterity and the network

concept of ties. Whereas NI theorists argue that the relation with another person is a specialized tie whose meaning is given and changeable by the self, Levinas argues that the Other is wholly other and is always *more* than any reductive label that I may apply. As we will see, this fundamental difference between an encounter with a knowable thing and an encounter with an unknowable Other will lead to dramatically different ideas of human relations and subjectivity.

The encounter with the Other happens when I encounter the "face" of the Other. "Face" here should not be taken literally, although the physical face is certainly one way of encountering the other. Rather, the "face" of the Other is anything that signifies the presence of the Other before me. Levinas writes: "the face is signification [but] signification without context. I mean that the Other, in the rectitude of his face, is not a character within a context. Ordinarily one is a "character": a professor at the Sorbonne, a Supreme Court justice, son of so-and-so, everything that is in one's passport, the manner of dressing, of presenting oneself. And all signification in the usual sense of the term is relative to such a context: the meaning of something is in its relation to another thing. Here, to the contrary, the face is meaning all by itself. You are you." (Levinas and Nemo 1985, p. 86).

This understanding of the encounter with another person as encounter with an irreplaceable "Other" who cannot be reduced to any amount of conceptual knowledge brings us to the core of Levinas's phenomenology: the ethical relation. For Levinas, to encounter another person as wholly Other is also to experience oneself as one who is called to be-for-the-Other. My encounter with the Other transforms my being such that I find my subjectivity characterized by an ethical responsibility: I am made able to respond and am called upon to be for-the-Other. Again, this ethical responsibility arises from the otherness of the Other. The encounter of the Other as an irreplaceable, infinite being resists my totalization of him/her and proclaims his/her

infinite worthiness independent of any value I can attribute in terms of myself. I myself am transformed, finding myself as one who is responsible for this infinite being.

It must be understood that Levinas believes that this description of the ethical relation is the fundamental reality of subjectivity. He is not merely saying that some people, occasionally experience the Other in this way. Rather, he argues that all relations with the Other are fundamentally ethical relations characterized by responsibility. Ethical responsibility, he says, is "the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity… Responsibility [for the Other] in fact is not a simple attribute of subjectivity, as if the latter already existed in itself, before the ethical relationship. Subjectivity is not for itself; it is, once again, initially for another" (Levinas & Nemo 1985, pp. 95-96). Stated differently, responsibility exists in every encounter. We may not always recognize the many ways in which ethical responsibility is manifest, but Levinas argues that responsibility exists independent of our conscious recognition of it.

It is, of course, possible to totalize and ignore the infinity of the Other—I can treat a taxi driver as a piece of machinery or a student as one just like all the others—but in doing so I am not actually reducing the Other, but merely reducing my understanding of them. "I don't distort them; I distort myself. I deny myself, not the Other." (Kunz 1998, p. 37). In other words, because my subjectivity is defined by my responsibility for the Other, my choice to totalize the Other in the face of this responsibility amounts to a denial of myself as one-who-is-responsible.

The universality of the ethical relation as the foundation of subjectivity is possible in part because the reception of the Other is a kind of "radical passivity." Levinas describes our reception of the command to be responsible for the Other as "a passivity—but it is a passivity beneath all passivity" (Levinas 1969, p. 101), meaning that I am called without my consent to actively serve the needs of the Other. This radical passivity is prior to passivity in the sense of

doing nothing to meet the needs of the Other—it makes this latter form of passivity possible as an active refusal of responsibility for the Other.

To recap so far, I have said that unlike life following the "natural attitude," in which I totalize objects as things which are useful to me, my experience of another person is an encounter of some*one* who is wholly other and irreplaceable. When I encounter the face of the Other, I am transformed as one who is responsible-for-the-Other. This transformation, the reception of this call, is a kind of "radical passivity," meaning that I am made responsible without choosing to be so. Finally, although I can deny myself as one-who-is-responsible-for-the-Other, this phenomenological account is the very nature of subjectivity, and is the essence of all human relations.

We can again see some dramatic differences between Levinas's phenomenological account of human relations and the theory of networked individualism. The idea of an autonomous self who is free to choose and forge relations, a concept which is the foundation of networked individualism, amounts to a denial of the self in Levinas. Subjectivity for Levinas—who *I* am—is defined by ethical responsibility. I am one who finds myself responsible for this particular Other. The relation is not an object that is separate from my being, but rather, constitutes my being. Relations are thrust upon me in a radical passivity; there is no freedom to choose here. By the time I consider how to respond to the ethical call of the Other, I have already acknowledged my relational subjectivity. This is the difference between "weak" and "strong" relationality, as discussed above.

It must be understood that the ethical relation is not a product of social norms or a Kantian system of ethics. Ethics here is "pre-societal," meaning it exists prior to any societal influence. It is thus not a "should," in the sense that one "should" care for the Other. Rather, it is

the essential nature of our human relations which we experience as a *demand*. Inasmuch as I encounter another person, I find myself in an ethical relation, as one-who-is-responsible. To further illustrate this point, Levinas turns to the example of communication. Specifically, he compares the word *said* with the word *saying.* For Levinas, the *said* of communication refers to the whatness of a communication, while the *saying* refers to the ethical relationality of the communication. "The *saying* is the fact that before the face I do not simply remain there contemplating it, I respond to it. The saying is a way of greeting the Other, but to greet the Other is already to answer for him. It is difficult to be silent in someone's presence; this difficulty has its ultimate foundation in this signification proper to the saying, whatever is the said. It is necessary to speak of something, of the rain and fine weather, no matter what, but to speak, to respond to him and already to answer for him" (Levinas and Nemo 1985, p. 88). As one who is responsible for the Other, I find myself needing to *say*. What is *said,* however, is up to me, and often is highly influenced by my social context. "Should language be thought uniquely as the communication of an idea or as information, and not also—and perhaps above all—as the fact of encountering the other as other, that is to say, already as response to him? Is not the first word *bonjour*? As simple as *bonjour*. *Bonjour* as benediction and my being available for the other man. It doesn't mean: what a beautiful day. Rather: I wish you peace, I wish you a good day, expression of one who worries for the other. It underlies all the rest of communication, underlies all discourse" (Levinas and Robbins 2001, p. 47) "Bonjour" literally means "good day," but Levinas's point is that the words are merely a socially-derived way to respond positively to one's responsibility toward the Other.

I have already hinted at the fact that it is possible to refuse oneself as one who is responsible for the Other. Indeed, Levinas does not argue that because we are responsible, we

necessarily act responsibly. He writes that "murder, it is true, is a banal fact: one can kill the Other; the ethical exigency is not an ontological necessity" (Lévinas & Nemo 1985, p. 87). Put another way, I am *commanded* to be responsible toward the Other, but I am not *caused* to be responsible. Freedom thus lies not in my ability to choose relations for which I am responsible, but in my response to my responsibility.

Levinasian relationalism is similar to networked individualism in that the quality of one's human relations is dependent on how one uses one's freedom, but the two approaches differ significantly when describing how this is done and what quality even means. For NI theorists, quality is understood as the degree to which a relation is useful for the self, and is primarily a question of skill and resources. Networked individuals who "thrive" socially are those who effectively use devices to establish capitally-enriched relations. For Levinas, on the other hand, quality is understood as the degree to which the self is "true" to the ethical demands of the Other which constitute one's subjectivity, and is thus a question of one's orientation or "way of being" toward the Other. Quality is thus understood not in terms of "less and more," but "true or false" (Warner 2001).

At the beginning of this chapter I said that Levinas presents a fundamentally different account of human relations from the theory of networked individualism. By now, I hope the differences are clear. Networked individualism is a theory of social life that begins and ends with the self. The self of networked individualism creates relations intentionally, according to his/her needs and wants. In this way, others are first totalized as objects that fulfill some personal need. For Levinas, by contrast, human relations are not formed out of intentionality, but rather emerge from a "radical passivity." In a sense, I do not choose relations, but am chosen. Thus, for Levinas, the work of the networked individual—of totalizing Others and organizing them into

networks—is an act which can only come *after* I find myself responsible for them. In this way, Levinas accuses NI theorists (and community lost theorists) of completely missing the deeper, relational character of human relations. Table 1 shows a summary of the main differences described in this chapter.

[Table 1 about here]

Why might these differences matter when it comes to understanding the social impact of ICTs? In next chapter, I argue that it matters because what was seen by network scholars as mere changes in the capacities of the self to create and manage networks actually raises more fundamental ethical questions. How, for example, do ICTs mediate my encounter of and relation with the Other? What are the ethical implications of constant availability? How does the ability to meet the needs of the Other through technology also signify the ethical limits of mediated communication? As I consider these and other questions, I hope to show that using a Levinasian understanding of human relations opens up many new and important opportunities for inquiry that the theory of networked individualism does not adequately capture, and that contrary to the claims of the proponents of networked individualism, there is more to human relations than what can be instrumentally secured through skills and network literacy. By ignoring the ethical-relational foundation of human relations, NI theorists conceive of ICTs as instrumental devices and contribute to a destructive enframing of the world.

CHAPTER 4: INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES AND THE ETHICAL RELATION

At the end of chapter one I discussed the affordances of ICTs on human relations according to networked individualism. Drawing on various NI theorists, I suggested that networked individualism understands the affordances of ICTs in terms of freedom and conflict. To summarize briefly, NI theorists argue that ICTs enhance the ability of individuals to exercise their freedom to create and manage their social worlds. This is so because ICTs allow skillful networked individuals to communicate across distances, access and create larger networks, and remain constantly connected. This freedom also creates more possibilities for conflict, however, inasmuch as an individual's unrestrained networking actions can (and often do) clash with traditional norms of social etiquette. For NI theorists, the implications of these affordances are understood in terms of inequality and renegotiation. The negative possibilities of freedom (especially isolation) can be avoided with a certain amount of skill. Because of this, NI theorists speak of the "network divide"—a form of inequality—as the primary obstacle to enjoying a healthy social life. If everyone could acquire adequate ICTs and develop adequate "network literacy," then the negative possibilities of this enhanced freedom could be largely avoided. This enhanced freedom does increase social conflict over questions regarding the acceptability of certain social actions, but these conflicts will eventually recede as the accepted etiquette is renegotiated and a new stasis is reached.

I argued in chapter one that understanding the affordances of ICTs in this way relies on certain understandings of human beings and human relations in order to make logical sense. Specifically, I first argued that NI theorists rely on the conceptualization of individuals as autonomous and egocentric agents who are free to create and manage their social worlds (but not

free to choose the corresponding obligations). ICTs are seen as primarily enhancing individual capacity to construct their own personal networks when human relations are already primarily conceived in terms of personal autonomy. The theoretical starting points of NI theorists frames pre-modern social life as autonomy undiscovered or suppressed, and modern technology as part of a social liberation.

In the two subsequent chapters, I suggested that this view of social life is inadequate, and I presented Levinas's ethical phenomenology as a possible alternative. In contrast to the "weak relationality" of networked individualism, Levinas argues for a "strong relationality" in which human beings are not free to choose their relations, but rather, "are chosen." Said differently, for Levinas, the agency of human beings does not apply to creating ties, but in responding to the pre-reflective relations that constitute one's subjectivity. In this chapter, I show that when we consider the affordances of ICTs on human relations from a Levinasian perspective, we arrive at altogether different conclusions.

A simple examination will begin to reveal the depth of the division between these two perspectives. NI theorists argue that ICTs give networked individuals more autonomy and power to create and manage their social relations. From a Levinasian standpoint, this possibility can be seen as nonsensical because ultimately we are not free to create or destroy relations that constitute our own subjectivity. My relation with the Other, experienced as an ethical responsibility, exists before I can will it to exist. Therefore, understanding ICTs as enhancing an autonomous and egocentric freedom that misunderstands itself to begin with furthers self-misunderstanding and fails to highlight important dimensions of human relations. A Levinasian perspective suggests a quite different understanding of the affordances of ICTs on human relations. If ICTs are not understood primarily in terms of their capacity to increase my ability to

create and manage interpersonal relations, what other kinds of affordances can a different theoretical starting point enable us to see? This is the question I take up in this final section, but which I do not claim to answer completely. This chapter should rather be understood as a starting point for thinking about the affordances of technology on human relations from a Levinasian perspective.

Availability

The affordances of ICTs on human relations seen from a Levinasian perspective will include a similar attention to the freedom of the individual, but freedom here is understood as a freedom to respond ethically rather than a freedom to make and manage relations. ICTs can be said to alter the possibilities one's the ethical response in two main ways: increasing one's ability to be available to the Other and increasing one's ability to totalize the Other. These possibilities combine to create a richly complex social world with both wonderful and terrifying possibilities.

In the first instance, ICTs can be seen to bridge gaps and increase ethical availability. With ICTs, a person can be more readily available to receive the interrupting call of the Other in need. This is especially true with mobile ICTs. This realization has led some Levinasian scholars to argue that mediating technology is essentially *neutral*. Cohen (2010), for example, writes that:

> "In our day, the ethical dimension of human proximity transpires across the communications computers make possible, just as human proximity takes places across phone calls, letters, and artifacts. The 'face' can be a letter. The 'face' can be an e-mail message. The computers themselves, like alphabet letters and telephones, like pencils and books, however, are neither good nor evil. The 'face' ruptures them, pierces them with the alterity of the other. By themselves they are shadows of shadows or masks of masks. For all these reasons, the issues raised regarding 'computer ethics' are at bottom the issues of ethics *simpliciter.*" (p. 165)

Here Cohen reminds us that mediation does not fundamentally alter one's relation with

the Other. Obviously there is a difference between mediated relations that place distance and abstraction between the ego and the Other and face-to-face relations, but Cohen's point here is that ethical responsibility persists wherever one encounters the Other. E-mails, letters, and other artefacts can always be traced back to an Other, and thus immediately create an ethical relation with responsibility. No matter the medium, the inescapable experience of responsibility persists, for where there is an encounter, there is ethical responsibility. Pinchevski (2014) similarly reminds us that "[t]he saying persists through its reduction to the said while retaining something of its unsayablity. The said must then contain, despite itself, its own prehistory—the residue of the original saying" (p. 57).

According to Burggraeve (2007), one's motivation for communicating across distances thus becomes a crucial question:

> Levinas does not ask "if" science and technology are responsible, but "how" or from what ethical sensitivity they are applied: from self-interest, which looks out only for itself, or from a sense of justice, which respects and promotes the Other as Other." (p. 104)

Do I take up a mediated communication in order to *bridge* a distance between myself and the Other, or do I take it up so I can do my business without being encumbered by the heightened ethical sensitivity to the Other that I would feel when in his/her physical presence? Perhaps it is true that people communicating through ICTs are more likely to refuse their ethical responsibility to the Others that they encounter virtually, but the point that these authors are trying to make is that distance does not deterministically cause individuals to refuse ethical responsibility. Returning to the language of affordances, these authors assert that distance neither destroys ethical responsibility nor makes ethical responses impossible.

Ethical Limitations of Mediated Communication

Recognition of the persistence of the ethical relation across mediation is an important

starting point for understanding the affordances of ICTs on human relations from a Levinasian perspective, but it is only the beginning. A thorough examination of affordances demands that we also consider the ways in which ICTs constrain or create limits for human relations. Earlier I showed that under networked individualism, the freedom to create and manage the social world is limited by social obligations relating to the relations in question. Networked individuals are free to make and break ties as they like, but they are not free to choose the requirements and consequences of the relations they wish to keep. Alternatively, for Levinas, the affordances of ICTs on human relations are limited by the capacity of mediated communication to meet the needs of the Other in question. Even when taken up in a way that is true to ethical responsibility, it would be a stretch to say that the ethical possibilities of mediated communications are equal to the ethical possibilities of face-to-face interactions. To explore the ethical limitations of ICTs, I introduce the distinction between interaction and communion.

ICTs can be powerful tools for the ethically-responsible self, especially when the ethical response involves solving problems and making exchanges. Online, I can share relevant information with someone who is facing a specific ailment or send money to someone across the world. I can also use ICTs to coordinate in-person meetings with friends and family. When it comes to the needs of the Other, however, visible problems that can be solved with actions or exchanges often only reflect his/her most superficial needs. While ICTs might excel at *interaction*, the greater need might actually be *communion*. An interaction, we might say, is any communication between two or more individuals, be it verbal or non-verbal. When two or more individuals communicate with one another in any way, it is an interaction. Social exchanges theorists primarily study relations at the level of interactions, characterized by an exchange of tangible or intangible content. This exchangeable content could be words, looks, money, or any

number of limitless possibilities. Recall that the NI theorists discussed above evaluated ICT use in terms of its impact on human interactions—they found that networked individuals have equal or slightly more social interactions (including face-to-face interactions) than non ICT-users.

Unlike interaction, communion is more demanding. Communion (formed from the Latin words *com* meaning "with" or *"*together" and *unus*, meaning "oneness," or "union") implies a presence and a way-of-being, rather than a simple two-way communication. To experience communion with another person is to experience something that the broad definition of interaction fails to capture. Consider the verb *to share.* In the world of networked individualism, sharing is most often the giving of some object from one individual to another (an interaction, or exchange). With ICTs, networked individuals share links, images, words and all manner of content with other individuals. In contrast, sharing can also refer to the experience of communion. Such use of the word does not refer to a transferal of content, but of a "being with." This latter use is referred to in the phrase "sharing a moment," or "sharing an experience." If sharing-as-transference is an intentional action, sharing-as-being-with is a particular way-of-being, characterized by a committed presence with another person.

Nouns and actions that we associate with communion contain this same sense of "being with." Take for example the word *compassion*, formed from the words *com*, meaning "with", and *pati*, meaning "to suffer," which together express the idea of "suffering with." Similarly, the word *companion* is formed with the words *com* and *panis,* which literally means "with bread," or someone with whom one eats bread. These words express the idea of communion because they refer to "being-with" another person in the passage of life.

An important question is to what extent communion is possible across distances through technological mediation. Many authors have expressed their doubts. According to Dreyfus

(2008), mediated communication is impoverished when it comes to sharing and receiving emotions. Dreyfus argues that the rich communication and sharing of moods that provides people with meaning and joy requires direct, embodied interaction that cannot be reproduced in most forms of mediation. One notable exception might be video-chats. Even video-chats are limited, however, in that the meaningful and important realm of physical touch is still out of reach.

Similar to the arguments made by Dreyfus, we can also question communication and distance in terms of the *saying* and the *said*. As discussed above, the *saying* refers to the ethical relation, while the *said* refers to the "whatness" of the communication. When in the physical presence of the Other I receive a rich field of direct contact which do not have to be processed into language. This is a *said,* but it is a *said* that is less constrained. In a way, I can *feel* and empathize with the Other directly (this is Dreyfus's point). When communicating with the Other through e-mail, the fundamental ethical relation, the *saying*, remains unchanged, but the *said* is now dramatically limited to include only written text. I am ethically responsible in either scenario, but recall that my understanding of what I must do to be-for-the-Other stems from my interpretation of the *said*, or on the things that the Other communicates to me through his/her communication (be it verbal or non-verbal). When the *said* is limited to written text, my ability to respond ethically in anything more than a superficial way is limited to the skillfulness and clarity of the Other. It is not difficult to think of a scenario in which the Other may be have needs that either cannot be adequately described through text or which the Other is not comfortable divulging online, but which would be clearly manifest in the direct in-person encounter. What is missed here is the ability to feel more directly the needs and sufferings of the Other while she is "passively being [herself]" (Turkle 2012).

In sum, from a Levinasian perspective, mediated communication through ICTs limits my

ability to meet the ethical demands of the Other who calls me. ICTs may excel at creating interactions between myself and the Other, but distance and a lack of physical presence makes meaningful experiences such as communion difficult or even impossible. While ICTs vary in how much they afford ethical action, all ICTs share these constraints to a certain degree owing to the mere facts of mediation and distance.

Distance and Totalization

The distance afforded by ICTs between myself and the Other not only limits my ability to respond to the Other; it also more fundamentally alters the way I receive the Other's call. As several Levinasian scholars have argued, this increased distance is a cause for alarm. One of the persistent ethical concerns relative to technology that arises out of a Levinasian perspective is the question of mediated communication and encountering the 'face' of the Other. Miller (2012), for example, argues that mediated communication presents a "crisis of presence," wherein the full impact of encountering the face of the other is diminished when physical distance is placed between communicants. Following his argument, a significant reason for the increased violence and carelessness that exists between people who communicate online, including cyberbullying and incivility on comment pages, is anonymity and a lack of physical proximity. Introna (2002) writes that "in the landscape of representation, of simulation, there are no faces only pictures—pictures to be consumed according to our categories. In the (re)presentations, the images on the screen, the voices of the other become faint and disappear. It is my contention that electronic mediation distances us from the face of the other—we remain undisturbed in our self-certainty" (p. 83). The central message here is that when layers of mediation are placed between individuals, the uncontrollable, unavoidable, commanding Otherness of the Other does not have the same interrupting impact. Simply put, it is easier for people to cause harm when they do not

have to confront the reality that their victims are particular faces with "proper names" (Introna 2002). Other technology authors present similar arguments (Flores and James 2013; Orgad 2007; Silverstone 2004).

The problem of distance for ethics is artfully described in the Carol Reed (1949) film, *The Third Man.* In the exchange below, Martins asks the antagonist Harry Lime how he feels about being responsible for the deaths of dozens of people who died after being given watered-down doses of penicillin that Lime had been peddling. The two men converse in a ferris wheel high above Vienna:

> *Martins: Have you ever seen any of your victims?*
>
> *Harry Lime: You know, I never feel comfortable on these sort of things. Victims? Don't be melodramatic. Look down there. Tell me. Would you really feel any pity if one of those dots stopped moving forever? If I offered you twenty thousand pounds for every dot that stopped, would you really, old man, tell me to keep my money, or would you calculate how many dots you could afford to spare? Free of income tax, old man. Free of income tax - the only way you can save money nowadays.*

What stands out here is Lime's insistence that the people in the city be referred to as "dots." By maintaining a careful distance between himself and the people who take his harmful medications, Lime is able to maintain this illusion and avoid the discomfort of recognizing his own responsibility for creating victims. According to Bauman (2001), this careful maintenance of distance was a key component in the systematic execution of millions of Jews during World War II. The mass genocide of the Holocaust, Bauman argues, was only possible because the Nazis first created a great distance (physical and psychological) between Germans and the Jews. Distance makes it easier to "efface" the face of the Other, meaning it makes it easier to totalize the Other into an object that has no significance other than its immediate meaning imposed by

the self. Where there is no present Other to cry out to me as an embodied being, there is less awareness of ethical responsibility and recognition of the Other as *other* (Bauman 2001).

In recent times, authors writing from a Levinasian perspective have brought up various examples which dramatically highlight the way in which the distance afforded by ICTs creates problems for the ethical relation. Miller (2012), for example, discusses the phenomenon of "RIP trolling," in which individuals write offensive and/or unsettling comments on webpages that are designed to be a reverent memorial of someone who has died. Miller also describes suicide chat rooms, in which participants urge at-risk individuals to go through with their intentions to take their own life and then watch via webcam when these individuals actually commit suicide. Similarly, Introna (2002) recounts the story of Nick Leeson, whose unauthorized speculative trading caused the collapse of Barings Bank and cost investors hundreds of millions of dollars. Buffered by abstracted world of numbers, Leeson never had to directly face the people whom he was hurting. These are extreme examples, but the impact of distance on the ethical encounter also takes everyday forms. E-mail, for example, rarely causes the same impact and demand for response as a knock on the door. Indeed, it is somehow easier to put off the Other that comes to me through an ICT than the Other who is physically present.

All these examples suggest that there is a difference between encountering the Other in a face-to-face relation and encountering the Other across a distance through mediating technology. While it is true that I am responsible for the Other in both cases, it seems also true that mediated relations afford this ethical responsibility differently than face-to-face encounters. Specifically, the mediated encounter does not have the same interruptive force of the face-to-face encounter. This difference afforded by distance makes it easier for a person to be violent or ignorant, or alternatively, makes it more difficult to recognize one's own ethical responsibility. This gap does

not make ethical action impossible across distance, and in fact, as discussed above, ICTs can increase ethical availability. Nonetheless, this gap does suggest that although ethical action is possible through ICTs, it is less likely because the distant Other interrupts me with less urgency than the Other who is physically present.

In addition to weakening the impact of encountering the Other, placing distance between the self and the Other in ethical relations also affords the self with an illusion of control. I say "illusion" here because Levinas would argue that the relation to the Other is precisely that which resists control, which is always beyond one's control. Social media sites that allow users to add or remove friends with a click of a button suggest that the user is in control of friendships—an affordance supported by networked individualism—but in Levinasian terms, relating to Others in this way amounts to a denial of the relationality of one's subjectivity. Because Levinas does not take relations as objects that are separate from an autonomous subject, the ability to "control" and "manage" human relations is better understood as an ability to deceive oneself. I may believe that by "unfriending" someone I am terminating a relation, but for Levinas, ethical responsibility persists—the relation cannot be disposed of so easily. Thus, inasmuch as ICTs allow for greater distance between communicating individuals, they also increase the possibilities of violence and self-deception. The degree to which individuals knowingly or unknowingly use distance to justify violent actions is an empirical question, but it is clear that this violence can and does occur.

Before moving on, it is worth noting that although everyone is exposed to the threat of violence amplified by distance, it is likely that the most vulnerable person in a world of mediated communication is the stranger. One of the distinguishing features of the Internet is that it has the potential to bring together strangers from all over the world. In a single day, a person can come

in contact with literally thousands of strangers via social media in its various forms. In network theory there is much discussion of "consequential strangers," meaning strangers who have something useful to contribute to one's personal network, but what about strangers who are not "useful?" If another person does not belong to one's network and is not directly capable of influencing one's network, they do not exist, at least not in a significant human way. NI theorists themselves recognize this gap in their theory: "Private contact with familiar friends and workmates is replacing public gregariousness so that people pass each other unsmiling on streets, highways and hallways. Such privatization may be responsible for the lack of informal help given to strangers in public spaces" (Wellman 2001, p. 43). Significantly, however, networked individualism presents little hope for this situation. With an autonomous, egocentric model of social life, "inconsequential" strangers essentially disappear. For Levinas, by contrast, the stranger is someone for whom I am ethically responsible, with whom I am in an ethical relation. This is true both online and offline. In this way, the relation with the stranger is *always* consequential, inasmuch as it is part of my subjectivity. Awareness of this responsibility can and is often obscured by the enframing orientation described above, but Levinas makes clear that disregarding or harming the stranger amounts to a denial of one's ethical subjectivity rather than a failure to materialize a relation.

The Meaningfulness of Social Actions

In making these contrasts between the affordances of ICTs on human relations according to networked individualism and Levinasian ethical phenomenology, I am not suggesting that NI theorists are completely blind to the possibilities and limitations highlighted by the Levinasian perspective. Regarding the limitations between mediated and face-to-face communication, for example, Wellman (2001) writes, "Are online relationships as good as face-to-face relationships

where people can see, hear, smell and touch someone, usually in a social context? Probably not." The difference, however, is that even if NI theorists recognize the same possibilities and limitations, their theory gives no special importance to them when considering the affordances of ICTs on human relations. For Levinas, on the other hand, these possibilities and limitations inherently carry the utmost significance for humans as ethical, relational beings.

An example should help clarify this point. NI theorists proudly display their empirical findings that networked individuals are not isolated and may actually spend more face-to-face time with other people. In spite of this, their theory gives no special relevance to face-to-face interactions. Following the assumptions of networked individualism, the desire to spend time with one another in the same physical place is merely a matter of personal preference and social norms, and the changing of these norms and preferences would not signal any significant loss. They *do* recognize that conflicting ideas about ideal relations create social conflicts; consider, for example, the following excerpt:

> "As Toronto student Nazia Shahrin recounts, "I find my mother and father value face-to-face communication a lot more than I do. To me, a phone call is good enough, while they really need to see my face. It creates a lot of arguments where I am screaming, 'I talk to you every day' and they are yelling, 'But I haven't seen you in two weeks.'" (Rainie and Wellman 2012, p. 129)

Their interpretation of conflicts like this, however, is surprisingly hollow: "The norms of networked individualism have not caught up to the practice of networked individualism" (p. 105). Of course, the inability to say anything more than a general observation of current trends is the result of espousing a theory of human relations that begins with a foundation of a free, autonomous self and that sees human relations as resources to be managed and used as instrumental ends. With such a theory, whether preferences or social norms change or stay the same makes no difference because it is ultimately up to the individual to decide what is of worth. Of course, as Levinas shows, this way of thinking misses what makes interpersonal communion

and embodied co-presence inherently meaningful and valuable. Ironically, then, with a Levinasian perspective, ICTs can be said to impact human relations by increasing our awareness of the importance of various ways of being-for-the-Other which are inherently limited by the affordances of our devices. The desire to "be with" the Other, in this view is not merely the manifestation of a social norm, but a desire that comes with acknowledging the reality of one's ethical responsibility.

The meaningfulness of social actions extends beyond the desire for embodied co-presence. As always-on, always-connected mobile devices, ICTs have the capacity to be used in virtually any time and place. This newfound ability raises all kinds of questions about how one ought to use it in social life. NI theorists recognize these dilemmas and provide some good examples:

> "When, if ever, is it permissible to interrupt a conversation to accept a mobile call or a text message? When, if ever, is it okay to check email on a mobile device while a meeting is taking place? When, if ever, is it permissible to browse a social network site when a teacher is giving a lecture? When, if ever, can you scream your dismay into the phone while you are waiting in line for the bus?" (Rainie and Wellman 2012, p. 105)

The difference between their view of the problem and Levinas's view, however, is that they believe that the solution to the problem is simply a matter of "renegotiating norms," explaining that "the rebalancing of public and private means renegotiating the norms of absent presence" (p. 105). In other words, following networked individualism, the conflicts and questions described here do not point to any inherent deeper challenge to human relations. Because human relations are simply believed to be what the self makes of them, the particular question about using phones in the presence of Others does not have any significant meaning outside of the fact that there exist corresponding norms which carry implications for the self. In

the end, it makes little difference whether one chooses to enter into a private world in a public place as long as the social conflict is removed and there are not negative consequences for violating a norm. Once rebalance is achieved, the dilemma is over.

For Levinas, on the other hand, the question of how to use a device in the presence of the Other is a fundamentally ethical question that demands a response that is mindful of the particular embodied moment. Levinas is extremely suspicious of social norms, especially regarding what is or is not ethical behavior, because he views the ethical as something that emerges from a particular encounter with a particular Other. Any attempt to create a rationalized list of what is or is not ethical (like Kantian ethics) must necessarily end in failure for Levinas because ethics is situated in the intimate ethical relation. Furthermore, as someone who witnessed the horrors and felt the pains of the Holocaust, Levinas is well-aware that what is institutionalized as "right" and "ethical" can quickly become a justification for genocide. This is the point that Bauman (2001), drawing on Levinas, so cogently makes in his own book.

At the same time, Levinas recognizes the importance of institutionalized norms and social expectations. He recognizes that although institutional forces can never guarantee ethical behavior, they are nonetheless important for their ability to sensitize or desensitize individuals to their ethical responsibility. As such, fulfilling our ethical responsibility to all Others entails constantly subjecting to critique the ideologies and patterns that are practiced and reinforced in society. According to Roger Burggraeve, "Ethics must be the permanent purification of the ideology lurking within every socio-political order, as it promotes itself as the sufficient and definitive embodiment of economic, social, and political injustice… The ethical ideal of radical selflessness 'to and for the Other' must put on trial every form of ideology present in a society, whether manifest or hidden, thus holding open the way toward an always improving justice"

(1985, p. 153-154).

This simultaneous distrust and reliance upon norms and institutionalized patterns regarding the ethical use of ICTs in human relations presents a striking contrast to the overall *dis*interestedness of networked individualism. Whereas networked individualism merely seeks "balance" and "renegotiation" and does not care about the act in question, Levinasian ethics demands constant ethical evaluation, rooted in the ethical relation the Other. Returning to the question of how to respond when an ICT brings an individual into a simultaneous encounter of multiple Others, NI theorists would say to simply follow the norms of mediated communication as they change and develop, while Levinas would say to continuously bring those accepted norms into question.

In terms of affordances, the inherent meaningfulness of particular social actions suggests that the possibilities and limitations of ICTs for human relations go much deeper than what networked individualism can account for. Whereas NI theorists see ICTs as enhancing an individual's freedom to make and manage the social world within the limitations of social norms and expectations, a Levinasian perspective sees ICTs as raising new ethical questions which reinforce the meaningfulness of certain social actions. Questions of distance, embodiment, attentiveness and communion, while inherently meaningful for the individual in an ethical relation, carry no inherent meaningfulness in networked individualism. Whereas NI theorists imagine a world where individuals do not need to worry about these questions if they do not want to and if they are not violating norms, a Levinasian phenomenology reminds us that as ethical beings we will consider these implications by virtue of our responsibility for the Other. Thus, whereas networked individualism sees the affordances of ICTs on human relations in terms of freedom and conflict, ethical phenomenology reveals that ICTs highlight the limits of

mediated communications. The accusation against networked individualism, then, is that its relative indifference toward these limits risks reducing human relations to mere egoistic exchange and perpetuating the destructive force of enframing.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The way we theorize human relations has significant implications for the way we study and interpret the impact of ICTs. In this thesis I have examined two theories of human relations—networked individualism and relational phenomenology—and have compared their claims about the social world as well as their implications for technology research. I hope that by now the reader will see that studying the impact of ICTs on social life with an egocentric, instrumental view of human relations is insufficient, inasmuch as it fails to consider the inherent meaningfulness of many dimensions of human experience which are affected by ICTs. While networked individualism is a useful approach in many ways, I suggest that a relational framework such as Levinasian phenomenology is useful because it casts light on the areas that remain hidden under networked individualism. With a Levinasian framework, we begin to see that the possibilities and constraints of ICTs as discussed by networked individualism represent only a fraction of the affordances of ICTs for human relations.

Following Heidegger, my aim is to enhance our understanding of technology and our social life so that we can establish a free relation to our technology and open up new avenues for social research. My fear is not that technology causes undesirable outcomes, but rather that we might become blinded to the meaningful depths of human relations and use our technology in a way that further contributes to this blindness. As I suggested above, ICTs can and are used for many ethical ends that enrich human relations. However, there are limitations to what ICTs can do in terms of human relations, and these limitations ought to be carefully considered. Failure to do so risks desensitizing a society to the rich possibilities of social life.

While this thesis presented a broad, general look at the question of ICTs and human relations, there are many possible implications for policy and future research. Education, for

example, is an area which is becoming increasingly mediated by ICTs. Educators would benefit from having a better understanding of how ICTs impact the lives of their students, in addition to their academic achievement. Policies hoping to create not only more intelligent but also more empathetic and socially aware citizens might think twice before uncritically embracing the promises of new technology. Educators that choose to use ICTs in classrooms would benefit by establishing and always improving rules and procedures that discourage egocentric, enframed use.

Sociologists more generally would similarly benefit from having a deeper understanding of human relations and ICTs. Qualitative researchers might use a Levinasian framework to understand the ways in which individuals deal with questions of presence and distance in various social settings, such as family, work, politics, or religion. When human relations are understood as "relational all the way down," we can begin to see the affordances of technology not merely in terms of instruments for the self, but as objects that alter my subjectivity by changing my encounter of the Other.

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Table 1. Three Accounts of Social Life

	Premodern Community (according to NI theorists)	Networked Individualism	Levinasian Relationalism
The Self	The self is autonomous, but autonomy has not yet been "discovered"	The self is autonomous	The self is relational
Relations	Relations are ties which stand apart from the self (weak relationality)	Relations are ties which stand apart from the self (weak relationality)	Relations constitute the subjectivity of the self (strong relationality)
Freedom	The freedom to choose relations and construct the social world has not yet been discovered	Individuals are free to choose relations and construct the social world	Individuals are free to choose how to respond to their inescapable ethical responsibility
Relation Formation	Individuals receive relations that meet some or all of their needs (passive instrumentalism)	Individuals seek relations out of self-interest (active instrumentalism)	Individuals do not choose relations, but "are chosen" (radical passivity)
Relation Quality	The quality of human relations is primarily a question of skill (obedience and loyalty)	The quality of human relations is primarily a question of skill (networking literacy)	The quality of human relations is primarily a question of one's "way of being"