"The Challenge of Absent Presence"


Gergen introduces the idea of absent presence by setting the scene of a group of people sitting in a room together, engrossed in their own individual mental spaces – reading a book, newspaper, listening to walkman, working on computer. Presence among each other is unacknowledged.

"We are present but simultaneously rendered absent; we have been erased by an absent presence" (p.227)

The focus of the article is the growing sense of diverted or divided consciousness invited/enabled by (mobile) telecommunications, in the context of technological developments over last 100 years.

A world in which one is physically present but absorbed my the mediated world of elsewhere, a world of both active and vicarious relationships, within which meaning is created or sustained. The growing sense is that this world of divided presence is are being absorbed into the world of full presence, constituted by the immediacy of concrete, face-to-face relationships. (p.227)

In elaborating the historical expansion and implications of the growth of absent presence, Gergen notes how Walter Ong, concerned with orality and literacy, was interested in how print technology impacted on mental life- structure of memory, rational analysis & forms of understanding, but did not explore how it also impacted on social life. For example the ways in which print affected relations between people, for example on patterns of trust, intimacy, fammily life and community relationships (p.228)

The introduction of print challanged the way people aquired understandings of the world around them, where meaning making was created and sustained by local ontologies and moralities of everyday life through oral culture. Print brought a myriad of voices (texts) from far away places (other communities and ways of living) which challenged the realities of immediate community. It is stated by Gergen as the first force in historical emergence of absent presence. (p.229)

He then continues to identify influence of following media technologies, in the form of monological presence, including populist radio, electronic recording devices/formats (eg. phonograph, cassette, CD, DVD players), film and television. The commonality between these are that "they insert alterior voices into daily life circumstances but there is little means (save for example talk radio) by which one can respond", and “nor do monological speakers typically have knowledge of the personal lifes of their audience”. Hence they do not easily allow a dialogical engagement which allows transformations in understanding and commitment between speaker and listener. It is suggested that such messages of monological technologies are impersonal and "one step removed from the life of the audience". (p.229)
Another noted feature of monological technologies is their progressive privatisation, although they were introduced initially to people with the ability to facilitate collective reception (e.g. families gathering round radios and TVs), allowing the incoming (but impersonal) voices to be accessible to all, so that it became a point of common reference to discuss and deliberate upon understandings. However increasing electronic miniturisation, cost reduction (and so personalised ownership/receivership), and the multiplication of media channel choice, has meant that collective space for collective deliberation has been seriously reduced, other that those reserved for the most populist choices. As Gergen notes, with the combination of these cases, monological technologies have “a relatively low degree of transformative power, but an increasing potential for immersing people in private as opposed to collective worlds.” (p.230)

As a contrast, dialogical communication technologies (telephony, online chat messaging, networked computer games, and most prominently supported over the Internet) are regarded to “facilitate the flow of interactive movement in meaning”. The power in all of these suggested is their enablement of instantaneous connections between people all over the world, allowing “[a]lien voices from any locale around the clock [which] may insert themselves into one’s consciousness”, and that this insertion “one participates in the construction of the world, and this construction can be uniquely tailored to, and expressive of, one’s individual circumstances.. In effect, the present [maybe/]is virtually eradicated by a dominating absence.” (p.231)

In his thesis, to follow the historical development, and before tackling the relation of mobile telephony in this emergence, Gergen considers the cultural and hence social/personal repercussions of absent presence.

He notes the potential of absent presence to render daily life a landscape of ‘dangerous liaisons’, in which technologies of absent presence “consume [personal and collective] fantasies, ignite desires and offer new ideas and directions, so that the realities embedded in what we often call our ‘primary bonds’ are placed under potential threat. One’s interests and enthusiasms may be directed elsewhere. The dialogic of local meanings may also be curtailed; when we are listening to voices from afar we are no longer building the realities and moralities of the local together. As Internet interaction increasingly absorbs our attention, new clusters of meaning emerge. Although these may be compatible with the primary domains of reality and morality, they may also function independently, tangentially or agonistically.” (p.231-232)

The next reverberation relates to interpersonal relationships, and in particular ‘significant others’ and intimacy. The value of ‘depth’ and ‘breadth’ of acquaintance in social relations can be characterised as vertical and horizontal relationships, where the former typically requires dedicated attention, effort, commitment and sacrifice, which if successfully engaged, means little need of others or interest in them; While having many friends, contacts and acquaintances means that it also demanding in time and effort. (Ideal is a healthy balance of both). In relation to these categories, Gergen understands the expansion of absent presence to mean a cultural shift favouring the horizontal relation over the vertical, as it allows one to expand their range of (actual, imagined) relationships in which one is engaged. (p.233)

The last note is that of the possibility of a culture where “individuals have little in the way of identifiable character” (p.233). This is a premonition based on the idea that to aspire a
identifiable character, personal trait or moral stance, is through “a community of persons who recognise one as a certain kind of person, who affirm this recognition over time and situation, and who hold one responsible for sustaining this manner of being” (p.234), accountable for actions and experiences which construct meaning within a community. As Gergen explains, absent presence, through its expansion, “with each new enclave of meaning, whether vicariously or interactively constituted, there are new selves in the making”, eroding the recognisable self. This is the stage, he notes, for a cultural condition where identities are increasingly situated, conditional and optional. (p.234)

So his concern is then “the emergence of a world of meaning cut away from the pragmatics of everyday life” (p.235). He states that language (and so the tools of collective dialogue and understanding) comes into meaning through relationships as people coordinate themselves around various activities, and warns that if attentions are diverted into absent present realms, the skills, repertoires and creative development for effective exchange in present everyday relations diminish. (p.235)

(However he does note the import of ‘languages’ from another realm into everyday pragmatics and realities are transformed: source of enchantment, idealisation and poetics p.236)

To summarise: “The erosion of face-to-face community, a coherent and centred sense of self, moral bearings, depth of relationship, and the uprooting of meaning from material context; such are the repercussions of absent presence.” (p.236)

So back to the mobile telephone. Note there are clearly differing forms of usage. There is a note that it does contribute to the expansion of absent presence, and does divert peoples presence during use from their immediate surroundings. However, it due to its contacts existing within a network of voices already known (originating from and extending face-to-face relationships) it may be deemed a endogeneous technology. Due to perpetual contact (always available, anytime, anyplace) it invites careful selection of those granted access to number, “the absent presence is broadened, but this time it is typically the casual [horizontal] relationship which is disrupted as opposed to the nuclear [vertical]”, and the dialogical nature of communication means that it is mutually sustained and vitalised. Communication is increased ‘with those who matter’ and so the community of intimates “more effectively sustains one’s identity as a singular and coherent being. One is continuously, if sometimes painfully, reminded of one’s place in the flux of social life. Here too lies the resources for refurbishing the moral compass. By revitalising the singular identity, a singular pattern of rights, wrongs. duties and obligations are made clear. The contours of conscience are clarified” (p.238-239). However for this reason Gergen also warns against its role in a kind of a technologically-enabled parochialism, which hinders polyvocal participation in a multicultural world (p.240).

In regards to the realm of absent presence, Gergen takes a rather simplified view focusing only on voice calls, he notes that although the mobile phone invites an expansion of the symbolic world that may be little related to the immediate surrounding environment of either speakers, it’s semi-public character of the communication does link the absent and present worlds (p.239).