Tales of the Map of My Mobile Life: Intergenerational Computer-Mediated Communication between Older People and Fieldworkers in their Early Adulthood

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Introduction

“Mobilities research thinks about a variety of things that move including humans, ideas and objects. It is particularly interested in how these things move in interconnected ways and how one may enable or hinder another” (Creswell 2011 p.552). Nowadays, it is increasingly common for members of the same family to be living in different regions, countries, or even continents than those where their grandparents live. This physical distance, compounded with the intensity of current life in western countries, hinders intergenerational communication within families. However, Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) opens up new opportunities, as it “spans space and time barriers allowing a person to work, learn and communicate from those times that are most convenient for him or her” (Zaphiris and Sarwar 2006, p. 404). How is the ‘mobility turn’ (Sheller and Urry 2006; Hannam, Sheller and Urry 2006) addressed in CMC research with older people (60+), and what can studies conducted in this field offer to the understanding of mobility and ageing? This chapter addresses both questions by building upon a literature review and a decade of fieldwork conducted by the authors in three European cities (Barcelona and Madrid in Spain, Dundee in Scotland) with approximately 700 people aged 60-90 with different levels of previous experience with Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). This chapter presents tales of an intergenerational CMC wherein older people’s mobile lives (e.g. migration, changes in their vital landscape, and commuting) played a pivotal role. Ordinary ICT, i.e. not specifically designed for older people, e.g. Google Maps, were key means of enabling intergenerational CMC with early adult fieldworkers\textsuperscript{2}, wherein older adults were the protagonists and shared their life experiences, rather than family matters, which predominate in a great deal of intergenerational CMC research conducted with older people.

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\textsuperscript{2} Early adulthood = 20-40 years old (Berk 2001).
Related Work

Whilst older people and ICTs might be two worlds apart, a great deal of CMC research has been conducted with people aged 60+. This might be accounted for the importance of communication in ageing (Nussbaum et al. 2000), and the mobility of younger generations within extended families. We seek to provide an overview of the research conducted with older people in CMC and discuss it from a mobility lens in an attempt to strengthen its connection with the theme of the book. We do so by reviewing studies we regard as highly representative of the CMC research conducted with older people since 2000 and strongly related to this chapter.

CMC in Virtual / Online Communities

A number of studies have explored older adults’ attitudes towards, and how they either actually use or would use, cyberspace (Blit-Choen 2003), virtual/online communities (Lepa and Tatnall 2002; Kanayama 2003; Xie 2008; Pfeil, Zaphiris and Wilson 2009), public online newsgroups (Zaphiris 2006) and SNSs (Gibson et al. 2010; Righi, Sayago and Blat 2013; Ferreira, Sayago and Blat 2014). This research tends to highlight that online/virtual communities can potentially be useful for older people to keep in touch with peers interested in the same topics as they are. Online communities can present older people living in remote areas, or those who suffer from a specific illness and/or are housebound, with an opportunity to meet people who are in a similar situation and engage in satisfactory social interaction (Kanayama 2003; Xie 2008; Pfeil, Zaphiris and Wilson 2009; Zaphiris and Sarwar 2006). Also, and despite being widely regarded as a very heterogeneous user group (Gregor and Alm 2001), this research shows that older people with different cultural backgrounds voice remarkably similar privacy concerns in their use of SNSs, e.g. being reluctant to (a) meet unknown people online, (b) make their own photos or videos public to the ‘whole Internet’ or (c) reveal personal information (Gibson et al. 2010; Righi, Sayago and Blat 2012; Ferreira, Sayago and Blat 2014).

Intergenerational CMC Within Extended Families

“Modern western way of life often leads to a geographical separation of grandchildren and grandparents” (Fuchsberger et al. 2011, p. 50:1). Hence, a number of studies have focused on understanding how older adults and members of their families communicate with existing CMC tools. In (Sayago and Blat 2010), approximately 350 older people adapted to their interlocutors, as they wanted to be socially included. They used video chats (e.g. Skype) rather than e-mail to keep in touch with their grandchildren (aged 5-9) on a regular basis (once a week or a fortnight) in 20-30 min sessions, as e-mailing was a much bigger effort for their young grandchildren (low literacy) than chatting. However, the same group of older people both preferred and used e-mail to communicate with their grandchildren aged 10+ (and adult children too), because of their hectic work, study and social agendas. In (Dickinson and Hill 2007), e-mail was often initially adopted by nine grandparents, who lived in their own homes, as a way of staying in touch with their grandchildren, as e-mail allows asynchronous communication irrespective of time differences and enabled them (and their grandchildren) to communicate when they felt like, as opposed to telephone calls. Older people, despite well-known difficulties in intergenerational communication practices, due to busy schedules or extended family members’ lack of
technology use\(^3\) (Tee et al. 2009), tend to find this type of intergenerational CMC “worthy of time and dedication” (Lindley, Harper and Sellen 2009).

Other studies, larger in number, have designed new systems to connect aged parents and grandparents to their children/grandchildren over a distance through the sharing of location-based video stories (Bentley, Basapur and Kumar 2011), media gifts (Kim et al. 2013), photos and calendar information (Brush et al. 2008; Lindley, Harper and Sellen 2009), or by means of multifamily media spaces (Judge et al. 2011), social media (Blanco et al. 2013; Cornejo, Tentori and Favela 2013) and intergenerational play (Feltham, Vetere and Wensveen 2007; Vetere et al. 2009; Chua et al. 2013). The content of the intergenerational communication most often described when using already existing or more novel CMC tools is of memories of family events, daily, leisure and amusing activities (e.g. grandchildren playing in the garden), and social support exchange. More recently, the use of audio-enhanced photos to support communication between institutionalized older people with aphasia and family members has been explored (Piper, Weibel and Hollan 2014).

**How is The Turn To Mobility Reflected in this CMC Research?**

A lack of physical mobility or difficulties in ‘getting out’ predominate in the discourse of the potential usefulness of virtual / online communities for older people who are either living in rural or remote areas or homebound (e.g. Kanayama 2003; Xie 2008; Pfeil, Zaphiris and Wilson 2009). The contact initiators of intergenerational CMC within the same family are predominantly the younger generations (Kim et al. 2013). This might be accounted for the fact that (a) younger generations are either digital natives (Prensky 2001) or more active ICT users than their parents/grandparents, and (b) older people are bounded in space, unlike their children and grandchildren. Thus, one could conceive of older people as being unable to use contemporary ICTs, due to age-related changes in functional abilities and little (or a lack of) experience with ICT, or as using them in ‘extraordinary’ ways\(^4\). Designing new CMC tools in a way that these are more accessible to older people is to be commended. Also, providing younger generations with novel and interesting ways of keeping in touch with their older relatives might be a way forward towards fostering and enriching intergenerational CMC within families. Yet, these new developments fail to answer the question of whether older people can become the initiators of intergenerational conversations with contemporary CMC tools, and, if so, how these encounters are. The tales of intergenerational CMC presented in this chapter answer this question.

**Over a Decade of Fieldwork**

We are Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) scholars whose aim is to reveal and explain how older people interact with and make use of contemporary ICT in out-of-laboratory conditions in order to inform the design of more accessible, easy-to-use and meaningful ICTs in their everyday lives. We consider that depth, natural settings,

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\(^3\) Typical stereotype when it comes to older adults and ICTs (Giles and Gasiorrek 2011).

\(^4\) This is in stark contrast to studies of mobile phones and older people. Mobile phones have become gradually incorporated in the everyday lives of most of them (Fernández-Ardevol and Ivan 2013) and their mobile phone usage might not be too different from that of adult people (Conci, Pianesi and Zancanaro 2010).
intensity, holism, non-judgmental orientations, and giving voice to people in their own local contexts (Blomberg, Burrell and Guest 2003; Hammersley 2007; Fetterman 2010), which are foundational elements of ethnography and participant observation, should (and could) help us achieve our objective. Since 2005, we have been conducting ethnographical and participant observation studies in which a number of older people motivated to discover, learn and become independents ICT users have participated actively. They had very different levels of practical knowledge of ICT, ranging from those who had never used computers and the Internet before to those who owned smartphones and had been using computers for more than two decades. The fieldwork activities encompassed

(a) three long-term ethnographical studies (2005-2008; 2010-2013; 2011-2015) carried out at a 30-year old adult educational centre called Ágora (AG), in Barcelona (Spain);

(b) an 18-month ethnographical study in the Dundee User Centre (DUC), a drop-in clubhouse physically situated within, and run by the School of Computing at the University of Dundee (Scotland);

(c) two participant observational studies (February – May 2013; October – December 2013) in Espacio CaixaMadrid (ECM), one of the centres for older people owned by the Spanish saving bank foundation, Obra Social “la Caixa”, in Madrid (Spain).

Approximately 700 people aged 60 – 90 (hereinafter, participants), took part in these studies, wherein we observed and talked to them (e.g. informal face-to-face conversations, semi-structured interviews, workshops/hands-on sessions, and focus groups) in different scenarios of situated ICT use, e.g. e-mailing their grandchildren and friends, setting up (and deleting) their accounts in Facebook, playing casual games and making digital videos with tablet computers and camcorders. These activities took place in courses, workshops and drop-in sessions either run or supported by the authors in the different settings. In these activities, participants played an active role in, for instance, deciding which ICT they wanted to use and discussing their reasons for (not) incorporating them in their everyday lives.

In keeping with long-term established data gathering practices in ethnography and participant observation, we wrote down most of our first-hand observations of and conversations with the participants while taking part in the aforementioned activities, or immediately after them, when the activity was so dynamic that it hindered simultaneous note-taking. These notes were taken either on paper or in PC / laptops. Data analysis combined Grounded Theory (Charmaz 2006) and thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). The ethnographical and participant observation studies are detailed elsewhere (Ferreira, Sayago and Blat 2014; Sayago, Forbes and Blat 2013; Righi, Sayago and Blat 2012; Rosales et al. 2012; Sayago and Blat 2010).

Given that not all of us were involved in all the fieldwork activities, we put together our fieldnotes and experiences of being in the field in the results, which are presented

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5 Courses lasted between 3 and 6 months, were planned in advance and several technologies were used by the same group of participants. Workshops, however, were hands-on sessions organized to explore specific aspects in which participants showed interest as the fieldwork activities progressed.
in the form of realistic (i.e. not imaginary) and confessional tales. As defined in (van Mannen 2011), realistic tales “focus on minute, precious, mundane details of everyday life” (p. 48), while confessional tales concentrate on “showing how the technique is practiced in the field” (p. 73-74). This combination of styles attempts to (a) show what the participants did and said and what it meant to them, (b) give voice to both the participants and the fieldworker in order to understand the impact of the latter on the findings, and (c) show how the mobility of older people emerged in these intergenerational CMC encounters in situ. We edited the tales in a way that they were representative of the most common types of intergenerational CMC that took place between older people and the different fieldworkers at different times. We witnessed two main different typologies of CMC. One of them is strongly related to the intergenerational CMC that predominates in previous research. Examples are participants (grandparents) turning to video-conferencing systems in order to keep in touch with young grandchildren whose writing skills were not good enough to establish fluent written communication (Sayago, Sloan and Blat 2011), and older people sharing YouTube videos in a private and meaningful way with close friends, children and grandchildren (Ferreira, Sayago and Blat 2014). The other typology, on which the three tales presented in this chapter focus, reveals a different type of intergenerational CMC.

Tales of the Maps of Older People’s Mobile Lives

The following three tales were edited and created by translating selected parts of our fieldnotes into English⁶ and adding details of the authors’ lived fieldwork experiences that connected and enriched them.

Tale 1 - Dundee When I Was Young

“Fit like (How are you), Peter?” I asked one of the participants. “Nae bad the noo (so far so good)”, he answered. “Have you seen these pictures? They’re aboot (about) the old Dundee. I can tell you what they depict, if you want”. “That would be terrific”, I answered, while sitting next to him and looking at black-and-white pictures on a website he had opened on his PC. Peter started to talk to me about how streets and buildings of the city portrayed in the pictures had changed over time. “Do you recognise this street? This is (name of the street), when now we have most of the shops in Dundee. And this is the famous bridge (...) Did you know that the bridge collapsed and then it was built again?” He asked me. “Did what?” I exclaimed in surprise. “Oh aye, I still remember what happened. It was chaos, a bit of a disgrace for the city. People were quite proud of the bridge, you ken (know). There is an expression local people use that makes reference to that event”. When Peter was about to tell me what these words were, the chairman of the DUC, who was making tea, jumped into the conversation, “don’t say it, Peter! He needs to figure it out on his own. It’s much funnier and a sort of a challenge (smiling)! I’ve got more memories of the bridge, but it’s time for our coffee / tea break. We’ll talk about it then, shall we?” From that day on, it was rare to have a drop-in session in which no participant shared with me, mostly face-to-face, but also in short e-mails – two or three lines at most - their memories and experiences of living in old Dundee. They were the protagonists

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⁶ The translation has sometimes kept expressions in the mother tongue of the participants in an attempt to write more realistic tales. The translated version in English is shown between brackets.
of the tales. When the drop-in sessions were attended by a few participants, three or four, all I did was to sit, listen and learn from their reminiscences, which touched upon important places such as the local area where they grew up, and how these places had either changed (e.g. with new houses, shops and department stores) or stood the test of time. These tales were primarily supported by websites participants already knew and digital pictures they kept or sought online. Participants also brought books and old newspaper clippings, that they kept at home, to the DUC for “ye tae learn more aboot Dundee” – as they said to me.

Tale 2 – The Story of My Life Before I Forget

“Bon dia (Good morning) Sergei, this your name in Russian”, Rosa, an AG participant, said to me before a hands-on session on e-mail was due to begin. “Oh, I’m impressed. What is your relationship with Russia?” I asked her. “I grew up and got married in Russia”. I wanted to know more about this aspect of her life, but I was running the session. On the next day, while I was checking my e-mail in the Internet room at AG, Rosa showed up and sat next to me. “Hi, are you still impressed by my Russian?” She asked me. “Absolutely”, I answered. Rosa started to talk to me while typing words in Google.

I had to leave Spain when I was a very young kid. I couldn’t stay in the country, because of Franco’s dictatorship. I guess you might know the reason. I was a refugee in Russia. I grew up in a school for girls. I still remember the harsh winters, the language barriers and isolation of the first weeks until I started to speak some Russian (…) Months and years went by, and I met my husband in a very nice square in the city centre. I got married and came back to Spain. Why am I telling you all these things? I want to tell you that I have been diagnosed with having Alzheimer’s disease, and before I forget, or I stop taking your courses, I want to share this slice of my life with you.

I was speechless. Before I could say anything, Rosa gave me a virtual tour of the city centre of Moscow and towns nearby by using Google Images. This tour lasted around 2 hours. While she was talking to me, she was able to find photos of the girls’ school she attended, parks, streets and public buildings online. Rosa shared stories of her youth at that school, her memories of playing and dancing in the parks, and how, and where, she met her husband. I asked her – in hindsight – numerous questions. She answered almost all of them with tears in her eyes. “Do you understand now why I can’t write about all these things in e-mails or these webpages in which everybody can read what others have written?” Rosa asked me. “These things mean a lot to me”, she said. “Yes, I see now why”, I answered.

Tale 3 – My Hometown and Local Area

All participants (at the AG, ECM and the DUC) were interested in Google Maps. They reported that they had seen other people using it and talking about the possibility of seeing their houses, cars and other parts of the cities on the computer screen. In informal conversations, especially when we were starting to know our participants better, the topic of ‘I’m (not) from here’ was recurrent. Hence, we decided to ask participants to show us their hometowns on Google Maps, as this could be a meaningful way for them to use this technology. This exercise turned out to be
exciting. The main reason for this excitement, at least amongst the AG participants, was that most of them had to leave their hometowns when they were children. As Paco put it:

Most of us are immigrants. We’re born in other regions of Spain. We had to leave our hometown when we’re children in order to have a future. I’ve been living in Barcelona for at least 40 years, but I’ll never forget my origins (…) Look! I’ve found my hometown. I can see the river where my mum washed the clothes. Oh, nice memories…

In courses, workshops and drop-in sessions, participants located their hometown on Google Maps and shared with us their memories of having lived there. These face-to-face conversations were so rich that whole sessions were sometimes devoted to talking about their hometowns by using Google Maps. In these sessions, participants located the houses in which they were born, the river where they fished, and how they made do with almost no money.

These conversations were digital too. Indeed, it was not uncommon for the participants to e-mail us – and other participants as well - screenshots of Google Maps inserted into Word or PowerPoint documents, in which they shared their memories in a highly visual way. Participants at the AG, ECM and DUC also created digital videos with the screenshots by using Windows Movie Maker and sent them to us via e-mail. These e-mails triggered both face-to-face and online (e-mail) conversations, which, on the one hand, helped us to improve a great deal our understanding of Spanish, Catalan and Scottish geography and culture, but, on the other hand, altered our plans for some fieldwork activities, which we had to postpone or change as the study progressed, because they did want to give us chapter and verse on their digital memories.

A different topic of these mobile ‘Google Maps-Mediated-Communications’ was the participants’ local area, e.g. their neighbourhood. Participants with more practical knowledge of ICT were the leaders of these conversations. While heading to the metro station near ECM, one of us came across Maria, who had to leave the session. “Oh, Hi, Sorry I had to run away, but I had an appointment with the doctor (…) By the way, let me show you something on my tablet”, she told me. “What is it, Maria?” I asked. While tapping into the Google Maps apps, she told me:

It’s only a minute (waiting for her tablet to launch Google Maps). Now, see, we’re here. Do you remember you asked me where to eat good Spanish soup? You must go to this restaurant, which is very near the metro station where you get your train back home, you see? There you’ll eat the best consommé in Madrid. I’ll e-mail you the directions if you want, or show you where it is now, if you want, since it’s on our way to the metro station. I’m paying a visit to a friend of mine and I’ll take the metro (looking at Google Maps again) in the Bilbao station, which is where you’re heading to (smiling)!

Discussion

As stated in (Creswell 2011), mobilities research is interested in how humans, ideas and objects move, and in their inter-relationships. How is this mobility addressed in
the results? In Tale 1, the extent to which objects, particularly architectural landmarks of the cities in which older people have lived most of their lives, have evolved or stood the test of time, played a pivotal role in intergenerational conversations, which were supported by digital and non-digital artefacts and fuelled by the desire of older people to share their knowledge of a city with us. Tale 2 and 3 reveal snippets of older adults’ mobile lives. Tale 2 shows how the life course (childhood and youth) of an older person, along with the historical context that shaped it, and current changes in mental health, triggered intense and emotional face-to-face conversations mediated, sometimes triggered, by CMC tools. The virtual tour of places and landmarks in Tale 2 are extended in Tale 3, wherein the geographical mobility of older people, reflected in migration, commuting and knowledge of local area, was the cornerstone of intergenerational conversations, which sometimes hindered already planned fieldwork activities and were on the move too, enabled by mobile technologies. This intergenerational CMC on the move might be surprising, as it does not seem to correspond with mobility scenarios most of us are familiar with, e.g. mid-age business people talking on their phones while commuting.

**Mobilities and Intergenerational CMC**

The mobility paradigm has proven useful to understand further a number of practices, spaces and people (Creswell 2011). This chapter suggests that CMC studies that take the mobility of older people as the central fact can extend the field of mobilities. The tales show how our participants took their time to share their memories and life experiences with early adult fieldworkers, sometimes, with great passion. While older people might not keep in touch with unknown people online (or even f2f), for our participants, engaging in intergenerational CMC with us - people who, despite not being family members, they have established a good and long-term relationship - was “worthy of time and dedication” (Lindley, Harper and Sellen, 2009). They were the protagonists of the tales, which were triggered by their mobile lives (e.g. migration, changes in their vital landscape, and commuting) and enabled/supported by a number of ICTs. This challenges stereotyped views of older people when it comes to ICTs (Durick et al. 2013). The personal, private and intimate elements of some of these conversations were key reasons in accounting for a strong preference for one-to-one conversations, either face-to-face or online, mediated by digital pictures and web maps, instead of SNSs. This result reinforces privacy concerns shown by older people in SNSs (Gibson et al. 2010; Righi, Sayago and Blat 2012).

The intergenerational CMC presented in this chapter is also relevant for ageing research. Firstly, across disciplines devoted to the study of ageing, e.g. psychology, sociology and biology, “the idea of aging as a lifelong process (…) of cumulative advantage and disadvantage (…) appears to be universal” (Gans et al. 2009 p. 729). In other words, it is difficult to understand an older person if we do not consider his or her past and current aspirations. Yet, it is striking to note that this common way of understanding ageing is not clear-cut in the content of much of the intergenerational CMC research reviewed in this chapter. Secondly, The Futures of Old Age (Vincent et al. 2006) predicted that migration would become an important issue in the likely futures of old age over the next 30 years, and that this migration should be “understood in (their) household, family and temporal context” (p. 217). This chapter shows that this predicted future has already been happening, at least, in light of the importance of migration in Tales 2 and 3. Thirdly, the three tales challenge
intergenerational communication practices, which are heavily dominated by over- and under-accommodation (Giles and Gasiorek 2011), i.e. when people interact they emphasize or minimize the social differences between themselves and their interlocutors through verbal and nonverbal communication. While these accommodations may be natural reactions when first encountering older people, our decade of fieldwork is mostly composed of stimulating and emotional conversations.

**Strong and Weak Points**

The long-term aspect of the fieldwork activities, the large number of older people who participated in them, and their cultural diversity might be the strongest elements of the research presented in this chapter. However, the profile of the participants, who were interested in ICTs and sharing their life experiences with us; the settings, which encouraged socialisation and learning, and our role as fieldworkers interested in learning with and from our participants, are likely to be the main limitations of the results. Further studies are warranted in order to corroborate or challenge the intergenerational CMC presented in this chapter, and also, perhaps more importantly, to deepen and widen the understanding of intergenerational CMC between people in their early adulthood and those aged 60+.

**Conclusions**

In the opening paragraph of this chapter, we highlighted the relevance of CMC for older people, and raised two questions. How is the ‘mobility turn’ in social science (Sheller and Urry 2006; Hannam, Sheller and Urry 2006) addressed in CMC research with older people? Our literature review has shown that the mobility of younger generations predominates in much CMC research with older people, who tend to be conceived of as being bounded in space. Our literature review also revealed that children and grandchildren are the contact initiators of much intergenerational CMC encounters, and that new CMC tools for facilitating intergenerational CMC conversations within families have been designed. In both cases, older people seem to be portrayed as not being able to use contemporary CMC tools or using them in ‘extraordinary’ ways. This chapter also addressed the question of what CMC studies with older people can offer to the understanding of mobility and ageing. Contrary to previous research, the tales have shown that our participants are not bounded in either space or time. Instead, they were the protagonists of intergenerational encounters, sometimes, on the move, enabled / mediated by ICT (and CMC tools) most of us already use. The tales also reinforce the need of seeing ageing as a lifelong process, with gains, losses, and full of life experiences. Thus, this chapter reinforces the importance of CMC for older people, and of developing a long-term, close-up view of how they use contemporary CMC tools. By doing so, we argue that the mobilities paradigm can enable scholars to understand further, and provide a different account of, intergenerational CMC. We plan to extend this research by exploring intergenerational scenarios of mobilities that are likely to arise out of older people’s growing use of mobile apps for instant messaging (e.g. WhatsApp) and emerging wearable technologies, e.g. smart watches.

**Acknowledgements**
Our research would have been impossible without our participants. Thank you very much to each and every one of you. Some participants have passed away as our research progressed. We miss you and this chapter is dedicated to you. We acknowledge the support from Life 2.0 (CIP ICT PSP 2009-4-270965), WorthPlay (funded by Fundación General CSIC and la Caixa Obra Social), EEE (TIN2011-28308-C03-03), Beatriu de Pinós and Alliance of 4 Universities post-doctoral fellowships, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation and the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation.

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