

I'll take my community *to go*

[Mary Chayko](#)

Mary Chayko is Professor and Chairperson of Sociology at the College of St Elizabeth in Morristown, New Jersey. Last autumn, she published [Portable Communities: The Social Dynamics of Online and Mobile Connectedness](#) (2008, State University of New York Press), a book about the implications of having access to countless others anytime, anyplace – and the impact of this constant availability on individuals, relationships, and societies. Dr Chayko is also the author of [Connecting: How We Form Social Bonds and Communities in the Internet Age](#) (2002, also by SUNY Press). In her contribution to receiver, Mary Chayko looks at the connections we make and the social networking that takes place on the internet and mobile phones. She discusses the immediacy and the appeal, the challenges and the complexities, of our spending so many moments interacting in on-line and mobile "portable communities".

It seems quaint now to recall a time when we had to stroll down the block, hop in a car, or pick up a landline phone to spend time with our friends, family, and co-workers. Social connectedness is now thoroughly and irreversibly portable. It is, in fact, so highly portable that we can spend nearly every moment of our lives in some kind of social connection with one another or with many others. Wireless and mobile technologies – cell phones, computers, mobile devices – have rendered interpersonal interaction and social networking immediate, frequent, and ubiquitous: we can reach out to one another almost anytime and anyplace, and we can, if we like, arrange our lives so that we are in almost constant contact.

In my research, I have found that many of us have become quickly accustomed to spending many, many moments in social connection, in some kind of community. I do consider on-line and mobile groups to be 'communities'; I use that term quite deliberately. When people email or text or IM, or visit discussion boards or social networking sites or blogs, the connections they form often turn out to have highly, even surprisingly, communal qualities. As one person I interviewed put it, "Now I can get my community to go – I can pick it up, put it in my pocket, and take it with me wherever I go."

We spend so much time with these portable technologies, in what I call portable communities, because they help us make social connections so conveniently. They help us seize and use the moments of our lives enjoyably, productively, and efficiently. But portable communities and social networks would not have become such enticing 'places' in which to devote so much of our time if the social connections made there were not real and genuine.

It's clear by now (though it wasn't when I began studying all this almost twenty years ago) that real social bonds and communities are made with the assistance of technology. These connections can be vivid, authentic, reciprocal, and highly meaningful for people. Of course, sometimes, they are none of these things. But generally, in the emotional, often intimate, immediacy of the moments spent on-line (especially with wireless and mobile devices) social connections are made easily – connections which very much matter to us. They bring about real tears and smiles, create real friendships and partnerships and break up real marriages and careers. In short, they produce genuine feelings and pleasures and problems, with real and definite consequences which, the sociologist »» [W.I. Thomas](#) says, is the true test of realness. We do on-line and mobile social connectedness a disservice (and fail to understand it fully) when we treat it as anything less than fully real.



The 'rush' of human engagement

One of the ways we can tell how real on-line and mobile communities are is in the high level of immediacy and emotionality they inspire. And this is one of the social dynamics I found most consistently mentioned by the people with whom I conducted extensive email interviews for my latest book *Portable Communities*. We routinely become emotionally involved with those whom we come into contact with via the internet or cell phones. Social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, and eHarmony open up pathways (networks) between people, along which real resources and emotions can flow. Emotions tend to rise up quickly and easily when we make connections in these kinds of settings. And why wouldn't they – when strangers find themselves unexpectedly becoming friends; when long-lost relatives and friends are located; when romances begin and end and move from on-line to off-line and back on-line again.

Making on-line and mobile connections often gives the users of those portable technologies a kind of emotional 'rush'. One of my interviewees described it like this: "One time I met a guy from Scotland on-line. We talked about our favorite books and everything under the sun. It was crazy...it gave us a connection that we couldn't ever have had otherwise. I felt giddy like I was going on a date or something. It was surreal." This is one of the reasons that computers and cell phones have become so indispensable to everyday life: the messages they deliver often tug at the emotions. They help us feel closely connected to one another. They even help us moderate our moods. People told me things like, "Going on-line or texting makes me feel better if I'm sad."

Emotional, even 'giddy', sensations are quite common in on-line and mobile connecting. Their strength is nothing less than the power and vitality of human association, no matter the form. They represent the spark of human connection, created in a moment of authentic social bonding and revived in subsequent moments of connectedness. This is, quite simply, the 'rush' of human engagement, of interacting with someone who matters, possibly intimately, possibly regularly.

As it turns out, social connections made and maintained in on-line and mobile networks and communities can actually be more engaging than those in the face-to-face world. This is because they are less constrained by the obstacles, fears, and judgments that often accompany getting to know someone face-to-face. Physicality can in some cases encumber and distract from the essence of a relationship. Social attraction can be enhanced when people do not have the means to see and touch one another. Just as some people can more easily be physically or sexually intimate in the dark, some communicate more freely in the 'darkness', distance, and anonymity that portable technologies provide.

Relatively fleeting social relationships can quickly and rather easily become intimate (even intensely so) when they are created and maintained via portable technology. Other portable social connections are more long-lasting. The majority of close internet bonds remain intact for years. And research by the psychologist »» [Katelyn McKenna and her colleagues](#) indicates that we may like one other more when we initially meet over the internet than when we initially meet face-to-face. This may be because we feel that we can be less inhibited and more fully ourselves when we do not have to concern ourselves with our physical attributes. And for those who are house-bound, sick, aged, disabled or perhaps just shy, portable technologies provide innumerable, invaluable platforms with which to find and get to know others.

The potential to access others and perhaps feel this 'rush' at any time of the day or night, can be not only exciting but comforting and reassuring. It can make us feel that we are less alone and can give us the general, more diffused sense of being 'plugged in' to society. As one person said, "I like knowing I can be in touch with anyone, anywhere, at any time." Another summed it up even more simply: "I like the 'in-touch' feeling." This is a large part of the appeal of portable technologies and is why it is sometimes difficult to pull ourselves away from our computers and our cell phones.



It is easy to spend lots and lots of time on-line and with our phones. Many researchers are studying the compulsive use of these technologies. Psychologist »» [Robert Bornstein](#) talks about "dual dependency": the desire to have portable technologies nearby all the time and the desire to have other people always reachable at a moment's notice. Combined, this is a powerful incentive to remain connected, even tethered to these devices, because, on some level, it feels like we're actually attached to our loved ones. Several people told me that they felt naked without their cell phones on them at all times and that they sleep with their computers or cell phones in their beds with them! Many more keep the devices not too far away at night and feel uncomfortable and agitated when physically separated from them or when they must be turned off.

It is becoming common to spend many hours a day networking, blogging, texting, chatting, and IM-ing. Often, we do these things simply to avoid perceived boredom; to fill, rather than to seize, a moment. Though this can be troubling in the extreme, it can also be seen as an antidote to modern stresses. Social anthropologist »» [Kate Fox](#) says that portable technologies help us restore the kind of continuous communication with our 'tribes' that was common in pre-industrial days. It is alienating to be physically separated from our friends and family, she argues. Cell phones reduce that alienation by restoring a kind of pre-modern sense of community in which people were in frequent, almost constant, contact. They return us, she says, to "the more natural and humane patterns of pre-industrial society."

And just having a relaxing, stress-free place in which to hang out is important, too, says sociologist »» [Ray Oldenburg](#). Hangouts are places where we can go and simply kick back, where we need not contribute anything other than our presence. The internet and cell phones help us find infinite places to hang out and people to hang out with. Keeping our portable devices always by our sides is like being surrounded by buddies, at least some of whom are bound to be available any time of the day or night. It feels good – until it doesn't.

The invasion of private time and space

On-line and mobile connecting is not without its downside. A host of social problems and crimes are exacerbated by using these technologies: identity theft, deception, harassment, bullying, threats to civil rights in cyberspace, the marketing of pornography to children, pedophilia, and the drug trade. There are definite digital divides; big gaps in access to this technology and all that it can provide. Excessive use can bring about dependency, overstimulation, fatigue, and depression. I examine all this in *Portable Communities*, but I want to focus here on the potential for surveillance and loss of privacy that can accompany our near-constant availability to one another.

Portable technologies routinely invade (just as they provide) private time and private spaces. Now, almost anywhere can be turned into a workspace, play space or hangout. This means that there is also no period of time during which we cannot be

reached, a condition that can be easily exploited. We may be expected to 'check in' with others (possibly many others) frequently and inordinately. Constant availability and, for some, constant productivity – even when we're 'off duty', enjoying leisure time and activities (which in and of themselves have become more 'productive') – has become an expectation in modern life.

We have become accustomed to filling nearly every moment with something to do, because with a portable device nearby, there is always something going on, someone to contact. Increasingly, we multitask, trying to fit more and more into any given sector of time. We not only seize but saturate every moment, especially the younger among us, who may not have known any other way. They are prone to giving what technology consultant Linda Stone has called »» "["continuous partial attention"](#) to a number of things at once – a fragmenting of the attention span that sacrifices depth for breadth, and is, in the end, quite draining. Disconnecting is important, too, and is critical to a sense of peacefulness, reflection, and rejuvenation; cognitively, emotionally, and physically.

Perhaps realizing this, about half of my interviewees told me that they do actively place restrictions on others' ability to reach them, while the other half chooses, or feels obligated, not to do so. "I like being out of touch sometimes," one woman confessed. "My husband cannot tolerate it, unless we are on vacation and I insist." But even those who refuse to be constantly available to others must respond to the nearly ever-present modern expectation that they should be. This expectation, that we will always pick up the phone or respond immediately to an email or text message, is widespread.



To be sure, portable technologies are practical and convenient to use, but we must be alert to their unintended consequences. We can now coordinate activities with an efficiency previously unimagined and even redirect activities that have already begun, but is it an inconvenience as well, when plans so often change on the fly? We can now reach others more quickly in an emergency (in fact, this is why most people report purchasing a cell phone in the first place) but are we now recasting practically every request or desire as an emergency? We've got a world of entertainment at our disposal but are we becoming unable to handle stillness and solitude? We can keep in better contact with children, partners, and co-workers but we can also keep tabs on them continuously, depriving them of the necessary privacy and space to be themselves, to not be found for a little while. We feel more safe and secure with cell phones and wireless computing at hand and more lost than ever when the batteries go dead or we are in an area without a signal or service.

The line between public and private is becoming hopelessly, possibly permanently, blurred. Portable technologies inspire personal expressiveness and creativity on a scale previously impossible. Blogs and social networking sites provide windows into others' lives through which we can hardly resist peeking. This is more than a little voyeuristic. "It's fun to see what people are up to," one social networker shared. "I guess it makes me seem almost nosy, but I like to see what people are doing."

It is therefore all the more critical that we remember (and tell our children) that these networks and spaces are anything but private. They are, indeed, social, in the fullest sense of the word. Even though most on-line and mobile activity is intended for a fairly small audience and is personal in its content, these spaces are not private in their structure. Messages and internet searches can be easily (and often legally) retrieved by others, including parents, employers, and governments. But in the emotional, often intimate moments spent in portable communities, few of us stop to think we may be making a traceable mark.

On-line and mobile connecting is a complex activity with complex effects, only a few of which I've been able to discuss here. But

I'd like to conclude with the consistent research finding that more people report positive than negative effects of internet and cell phone use overall, especially when used for social purposes. The nature of these effects depends, of course, on the individual's experience, the activity being undertaken, and the motivation for and extent of use. Both pleasures and difficulties abound in portable connectedness and this will always be the case.

Social interaction, in all its forms, is messy, risky, and complicated. It is responsible for our grandest highs and deepest lows, and quieter moments as well, of course. Portable technologies allow us to feel this array of feelings and have this range of experiences at the touch of a button or the click of a mouse. They help us fill the moments of our lives with emotional, accessible, immediate social connectedness. This is alluring and practical, exciting and disappointing, good and bad and neutral. Just as when we interact face-to-face, we cannot know exactly what we will get when we use portable technologies to form social connections, but in our stubbornness and vulnerability and great human need, we keep coming back for more. "Sometimes I just go to my favorite site or check my profile," one young woman confided, "and it's like someone has left me gold or something!"

This article was written for *receiver*

Contact: [Mary Chayko](#)

Author Profile: Mary Chayko



..... **About**

Mary Chayko was one of the first sociologists to study the impact of the internet on society and is today one of the leading voices in this field. She is Professor and Chairperson of Sociology at the College of St. Elizabeth (Morristown, New Jersey, USA) and received her PhD in Sociology at Rutgers University, New Jersey. She has written extensively on media, technology and society, publishing articles in such journals as *Communication Research*, *Sociological Forum*, *Symbolic Interaction*, *Humanity and Society* and *The International Journal of Web-Based Communities*. Her two books with SUNY Press, *Portable Communities: The Social Dynamics of Online and Mobile Connectedness* (2008) and *Connecting: How We Form Social Bonds and Communities in the Internet Age* (2002), have been widely praised for capturing the ways that technology is altering the form and content of social relationships, community, and identity.

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