Social proximity in the network society: Online and offline boundaries in a business community

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Abstract

The introduction of wireless internet and the smartphone has made a lot of new communication channels available to many people (e.g., Skype, Whatsapp, Google Chat, Twitter, and Facebook). Communication technologies offer many opportunities for staying connected. In addition, these technologies constitute an equally important instrument for regulating, organizing and terminating social connections. What role do communication technologies have in the creation of social proximity within a small business? To answer this question, the present article conducted qualitative research on a group of young tech-savvy people who are working together in a small company called SETUP. The goal of this fieldwork was to acquire in-depth insights into the way such individuals relate to newly offered opportunities to structure their online and offline social environment. Each person in this group struggles in his or her own way with defining social boundaries between "self" and "other"; between "colleagues" and "friends"; and between "us" and "them." Communication technologies are additional tools for ensuring that new ways are found for establishing such privacy boundaries, both online and offline.

Keywords: business anthropology, SETUP, network society, privacy, communication technology, social proximity

Do I know you?

Dear reader, how would you like to keep in touch? We don't see each other very often any more. That is not a problem, we are busy of course. Maybe we will communicate via Whatsapp, or are we already friends on Facebook? You don't have Facebook, you say? Okay, can we still exchange some old-fashioned text messages, but not too often (perhaps not after 6:00 p.m.? We are colleagues after all). What do you think of a Skype session, or is Skype only intended for use among close friends? Would you like a long discussion, with a new e-mail for each topic? Can I tell you about my new relationship on Google chat?

Technology gives us new ways to connect and disconnect with our close friends, acquaintances and even strangers. We have new tools at our disposal to define and redefine the boundaries of these social networks. For most of us, our phones or computers help to organize and structure our social environment in the ways that we prefer. New communication channels pose a constant challenge to shifting social boundaries.

In role of participant-observer, I immersed myself in the lives of a group of young tech-savvy people who are working together in an organization called SETUP. This is a small so-called

"media lab": a place where new ideas and creative concepts regarding innovative technologies are being generated and questioned (SETUP, 2012a). SETUP is a program run primarily by freelancers and volunteers in the center of Utrecht, The Netherlands. Over the course of three months, I conducted research there to grasp the meaning these individuals ascribe to their social surroundings. Each of the SETUP-ers had his or her own vision of different social contexts, and a unique way of dealing with the digital communication tools that are available. During this time, I became part of the company as a resident researcher for the purposes of writing this descriptive article from a meaningful point of view for the SETUP-ers. This research from within SETUP is mainly based on participatory observation and in-depth interviews.

The question I mulled over for several months while I was doing this research was: what role do communication technologies have in the creation of social proximity within SETUP as a community? In this question, the term "communication technology" has many different meanings, since everyone gives communication technology a different place in their lives. For the group of SETUP-ers, this technology is not static and monolithic, but multifaceted and always subject to change. A closer look reveals that communication technology has four different levels: practical, symbolic, structuring and regulating. This paper will be organized in terms of a discussion of each of these roles.

The article begins with a discussion of the key concepts in this article: communication technology, social proximity and the underlying conceptual process; privacy. This will be followed by a description of the methodology of the research and a brief description of SETUP as a social organization and as a business. Next there are four empirical chapters: "SETUP in the cloud" discusses the practical role of communication technology in the flow of work. "Do you speak SETUP" describes the typical SETUP language and humor, which underlines the symbolic importance of technology. The excursus that follows, "The system and the user", invites the reader to have a closer look at the structuring power of technology. The final chapter "New tools, ancient boundaries" is about individuals using the digital tools they have in order to regulate social boundaries.

Theoretical framework

Communication technology is the first comprehensive concept that needs a little introduction in order to properly understand the empirical chapters. Ever since the introduction of the world wide web (www) in 1991, there has been a rapid intensification of digital information networks. The introduction of wireless internet and the smartphone helped the introduction of many new mass communication channels (like Skype, Whatsapp, Google Chat, Twitter or Facebook). In this article, these new media are all considered "communication technologies", given that they facilitate the exchange of information among persons who are not in the same physical place. The concept "communication technologies" includes both hardware (e.g., smartphone or laptop) and software (i.e., the above communication channels) that facilitate connectivity among persons. These technologies facilitate more and more options to structure our social interactions with the people around us. There is more room for initiative because there are more choices to be made than in the pre-internet era. How would you like to be in touch with your family, friends and colleagues?

Organizing social surroundings involves relating to surrounding people through different social contexts. This "privacy process" is constantly subject to change. Privacy is a complex concept whose definition has changed over time (cf. Hoek, 2011, n.p.). The present article uses the definition of Irwin Altman and Walter R. Gove, who describe privacy as an interpersonal boundary regulation imposed by each individual upon their social environment (Altman & Gove, 1978). These authors stress that social interaction has an optimum curve. In other words, everyone has his or her comfort level regarding how much they want to disclose. They argue that too much or too little social stimulation has consequences on the functioning of the individual (ibid, pp. 10-14).

"Interpersonal" refers to a mutual process among different individuals. In defining these social boundaries, one also necessarily redefines social distance on an ongoing basis.

While privacy is a process involving the regulation of interpersonal boundaries, social proximity is the variable according to which specific social relationships are defined. These labels can be based on a specific social context (e.g., "family," "colleagues," "friend from high school") or emotional closeness (e.g., ranging from "acquaintance" to "soulmate"). Most of the time, however, one needs more words to define a social relationship, for the meaning of labels is not fixed but multifaceted and ambiguous; no perfect definition is of course possible. For instance, although the SETUP-ers are bound by their shared loyalty to a company and are therefore "colleagues," most of them are involved in more complex social relationships with one another. Most SETUP-ers had a hard time describing their relationships with fellow SETUP members. Dongwei, replied: "All of them are people who could be friends." Frank-Jan used the term, "roommates" and Lara said: "Others at SETUP are more like classmates to me. I see them a lot, and it would be possible to be friends with most of them, but it still seems 'a bridge too far' to actually invite them at home". Thus, people indicate "how they know one another" in terms of social proximity, which functions as a descriptive label that interprets the gray area within which social relationships are formed.

Methodology

As is typical in anthropological research, the primary methodology used in the present study is participatory observation. In this qualitative research method, the researcher tries to adopt the ways in which his or her informants (i.e., "research subjects") give meaning to their lives. This research technique attempts to convey useful in-depth insights into the meaning SETUP-ers give to their social surroundings (Boeije, 2009, p. 11) in order to reflect their perspective whenever possible.

I joined the SETUP group for eight hours a day, five days a week over the course of three months. During this period, I spent most of my time at the office, but I also went to the various sites where events were held that were organized by the team. In the office, I had a chair of my own at a big table, which proved to be a good spot to listen to and participate in the ongoing conversations. I wrote notes in a small booklet or typed them on my laptop. Subsequently, during quiet periods, I had time to discreetly process the notes on my laptop so that SETUP-ers would not feel observed (thus avoiding the so-called Hawkthorne effect). I processed the more sensitive information at home.

I used the program Nvivo to help me structure the information I gathered in codes. I started open coding, exploring and naming each point of interest with a new code. As the fieldwork progressed, I tried out axial coding to see if I could place each of the different codes in relation to the others, making them a network of nodes. I wrote the different subjects I had coded so far on a poster at home as a way of organizing them. At the same time, I formulated hypotheses to verify the relationships between these nodes. Finally, I decided which nodes to erase, which to split into two or more different nodes, and which to keep. During the course of my fieldwork, I constantly reformulated possible hypotheses. Thus my fieldwork involved a constant back and forth between data collection on the one hand, and the formulation and testing of hypotheses on the other.

In addition to my participatory observation, I scheduled two to four unstructured interviews a week. To conduct an interview, I would call one of the informants aside, and we went to one of the nearest coffee shops, an environment that afforded the privacy to discuss the subjects I had prepared on a list. These subjects constantly changed, given the fact that different interests emerged during the course of my research. Thus, I interviewed most members of the SETUP group multiple times regarding a variety of subjects. Often I had a couple of hypotheses which I tried to evaluate. Sometimes I stated a hypothesis directly, but most of the time I gathered information to validate or rectify the hypothesis.

It is essential to adapt validity and reliability to the nature of qualitative research (Boeije, 2009, Chapter 6). Because all interviews were unstructured and non-reccurring, reliability was

specifically dependent on repetitive events (e.g., daily lunches and weekly gatherings) and research triangulation (in order to verify data with multiple research techniques). Verification or rectification of hypotheses was done using data gathered in both participatory observation and in-depth interviews. Internal validity refers to the coherence between different concepts assumed to be related with one another (Boeije, 2009, p. 170). As part of the process of testing internal validity, I presented the main hypotheses to Frank-Jan during the last phase of the research. After his confirmation, I made a Powerpoint presentation of my main findings in order to elicit feedback as a "member's check". Although the small amount of people researched is typical for qualitative research, the major flaw of this research is the fact that the study's external validity is restricted to this specific situation.

SETUP: The organization

Although business anthropology is a nascent subspecialty within cultural anthropology, many anthropologists within "organizational anthropology" or "corporate anthropology" emphasize the importance of anthropological research within the business context (Marrewijk, 2010; Chapman, 2004; Jordan, 2010; Lilis & Guan Tian, 2010). Fortunately, enough research has been done to enable a closer look at "the corporation" from an anthropological perspective. A corporation is a goal-oriented body that has to deliver a collective product. A corporate community is primarily bound by this shared objective. But a company also comprises a social organization in which social relationships are formed (Lilis & Guang Tian, 2010, p. 104). Every corporation has its own social norms and values, and therefore each corporation has its own corporate culture. Although SETUP is a small business instead of an international corporation, these concepts can be applied, at least partially, as will be done in the brief overview of SETUP:

SETUP was launched by six entrepreneurs in 2011, who wanted to create a platform to experiment with new technologies. SETUP thus became one of the few "media labs" in The Netherlands. SETUP organizes and facilitates meetings and events using a wide variety of form and content. The small organization came to define their mission as that of providing a "new stage for creation and innovation of digital media" (SETUP, 2011). Examples of events that SETUP organized include a "finish-your-website weekend", the collaborative testing of sleep applications on mobile devices, and walking around with a cardboard "Facebook Timeline" at the Dutch festival "De Beschaving" ["Civilization"] (SETUP, 2012b).

Many bigger companies are characterized by a rigid hierarchical structure which directly influences the way social relationships are being formed. These corporate cultures are often based on rank differences and power relations (cf. Campbell & Craig, 2008, pp. 478-491). However, within SETUP there is little room for hierarchical differences. As stated in their policy: "SETUP is a small and horizontal organization that operates out of one office". SETUP also defines itself as a "matrix organization", which means that, while everyone has their own role and responsibility, no one is essentially in charge over others.

During the course of my research, SETUP consisted of nine freelancers, each with their own contract for two to three days a week. In addition, Lara and Hans (the two trainees) and myself (as a resident researcher) spent time in the SETUP office on a daily basis. Lara helped with the preparation of events, while Hans was a video and website production intern, and I regularly engaged in minor production tasks myself. Among the freelancers, Anke and Krista had received education in Arts Policy and Management. Lex used to work as an archivist and programmer, as did Juriaan, whose specialty is web development. Thomas has a degree in Theater and Storytelling, Tijmen was a lecturer at the Hogeschool van Amsterdam [Academy of Amsterdam] in interface design, Rens has a graduate degree in Psychology and conducted his own research at the Rathenau Institute. And last but not least, Dongwei and Tom were both directly involved in the master's degree program in New Media and Digital Culture at the Utrecht University, Dongwei as a student and Tom as a lecturer.

In short, SETUP is a two-year old media laboratory which organizes and facilitates events and meetings aimed at stimulating the public creation and innovation of digital media. With a dozen of people altogether of varying backgrounds including three interns, SETUP is a small dynamic organization which is proud of its non-hierarchical nature.

What follows is a series of chapters based on empirical data. The first of these chapters provides a general description of the practical role of communication technology in facilitating the flow of work within the SETUP company, before describing the more symbolic role of communication technology in the social group.

Empirical chapters

1. SETUP in the cloud

I hear a dense noise of keystrokes and the soft clicking of computer mice, combined with the constant hum of computer fans, like the sound of a relaxing fountain. Paper is being folded, a phone vibrates, scroll wheels creak, and fingers tap. Nine persons are busily at work: earplugs in, headphones on, everyone in front of a laptop on the big table, all connected to an electrical power supply.

In the middle of the office, which is about four by seven meters, is a large table. The table is actually made of four doors that lie horizontally on trestles. On the table are several power outlets and in the middle of the table is a router with lights that constantly flicker. In the corner of the table is a small computer with a monitor. When you enter the office there is a giant tear-away paper pad hanging on the wall which lists upcoming events.

On my first day at the office, I received the password to access the Dropbox, SETUP's "digital archive closet". All files created by the company are divided into a number of different folders and stored on this online server. But this is not the only way SETUP-ers work and communicate online. Later on, I found out that the flow of work is actually spread over many platforms (i.e., online services that facilitate the exchange of information). Such services include Dropbox, Facebook, Twitter, Roundcube, Highrise, Basecamp, Piratepad, Etherpad and Workflowy. All these platforms are part of what Olson and Olson define as "workflow": "all [communication] instruments that contribute to the way work is organized" (Olson & Olson, 2008, p. 551). Understanding the workflow within SETUP requires a familiarity with all of these platforms.

The fact that all these computer files are stored online means that they are in "the cloud" (Vaquero et al., 2009, pp. 54-55). This central server is always accessible to everyone from SETUP, anywhere and anytime (as long as they are connected to the internet, of course). Therefore the workflow within SETUP is not bound by either space or time. People do not have to go to the office to be able to work: If they prefer, they can work on the couch at home or in a coffee shop. Neither are they required to work from nine to five; they are free to manage their working time as they like. The SETUP office itself does not have fixed hours, and employees enter and leave at all hours of the day - and sometimes at night as well.

In short, working in the cloud provides many opportunities and makes the flow of work more flexible than a traditional office environment. The practical role of communication technology is to facilitate the workflow, which is spread over many platforms in the cloud. This organization of the flow of work is typical for SETUP.

2. Do you speak SETUP?

By addressing each other as "SETUP-er" instead of "colleague", "team-member" or "employee", they mutually underline the importance of belonging to the SETUP community. It is a social community of people who have more in common with one another than the fact that they happen to work for SETUP. They share certain values and ideas which Frank-Jan calls a "common interest."

Everyone seems to have their own ideas and opinion about recent technological developments. Opinions often clash on the work floor and lead to group discussions concerning issues like the use of open-source software, or the relative merits of different so-called "project management tools" and "cloud-storage media". Individual choices in this regard function like heartfelt personal statements: Hans does not use a smartphone, Tijmen is in favor of using open-source software, Tom promotes project management software like Highrise and Basecamp (which are not open-source) and Juriaan is vehemently anti-Apple (describing the company as "cult-like").

But the fact that SETUP members have an opinion about these technological subjects, and take the time to discuss their own point of view, indicates that these are shared topics of interest. With their ongoing conversations about new communication technologies, these individuals are mutually negotiating meaning. The discussions reflect the importance of communication technology as a shared common interest - as part of what it means to be socially included in the SETUP group. Thus, the role communication technology is playing is not limited to the facilitation of workflow in the cloud, but is also of symbolic importance to SETUP.

The symbolic importance of communication technology is also embodied by the specific language and humor used by SETUP-ers. When I started my research, it was very hard to understand every word that was being said. It was hard for me because the language involves a *mélange* of English and Dutch, and is filled with abbreviations. The events being organized were called "bit" and "byte" events, a direct reference to bits and bytes as digital units, whereby a bit event is minor, and a byte event is major. Terms like "interface", "datascrapen," "awkward cricket," "retweet," "hashtag," and "black box" were frequently used, and everyone seemed to understand the meaning of these English words.

I wrote the following in a field note after spending two weeks with SETUP: "I feel I am still not able to speak their language, even though we all speak Dutch." I tried to wade through the flood of words, and after six weeks I began to see the importance of this shared language. I made a list of all the words I did not understand and asked for an explanation or looked for their meaning online. Most words seemed to be direct references to popular movies (e.g., *Inception*), games (e.g., Angry Birds), information and communication technologies (ICT, e.g., Facebook and Twitter), series (e.g., Family Guy and Southpark) and memes (A meme is "a contagious information pattern" (SETUP, 2012c), usually an online image or movie that has been used and reused, until it has a life of its own; i.e., nyancat, awkward cricket). I would like to characterize such jargon as forming part of "digital culture," or, in the words of one of the founders of SETUP, "internet culture and intangible heritage".

At times, understanding the humor of SETUP-ers was as difficult as deciphering their language. When I told my first joke that made several people laugh, it made me think about the role that humor plays in being a part of SETUP and by extension of part of any organization. After I heard quite a few jokes I did not really get, making a joke that caught on felt like a huge confirmation to me. In interviews with several SETUP members, I discovered that others recognized the initial difficulties with the SETUP humor. Hans, who started his internship at the same time I started my research, indicated that the humor was difficult for him to grasp as well. Lara said she did not dare to make jokes when she first started working there, a feeling I surely recognized. Krista, one of the freelancers, explained: "I only gradually came to understand the humor. You really need time to kind of grow into this humor. But now I understand the jokes better, because I know what they are referring to". Being able to make jokes and laugh at others' jokes is very important in creating the feeling of belonging to the social SETUP group. To assure full inclusion, it is essential to learn to understand the humor, and for some of us, it simply means an uncomfortable period of acclimatization.

As is the case with the peculiar jargon, participating in the humor depends on understanding the references used in the humor. The words and jokes refer to the previously mentioned "common interests." This points to the fact that communication technology, as a part of a wider digital culture, is what Eriksen calls a "common denominator": shared knowledge with a strong symbolic value to a social community (Eriksen, 2002, p. 13). Because I would like to emphasize the symbolic value of

this shared knowledge, I prefer to use the term "symbolic knowledge." In referring to this shared symbolic knowledge, SETUP-ers confirm their social relationship and social identity. This mutual recognition (Eriksen, 2002, p. 28) is done in a language and a humor that is typical to the social SETUP community. If you do not get the jokes and cannot "talk the talk," you will end up dropping out.

The importance of the symbolic role of communication technology as part of the wider digital culture is underlined by the importance of the symbolic knowledge that the language and humor refer to. Language and humor strongly confirm the feeling of belonging to the SETUP community, and therefore also define those who "do not belong."

The next chapter will describe the structuring role of communication technology. This will enable readers to better understand the final chapter, which shows how SETUP-ers use these technologies to regulate their social environment.

3. The system and the user

Information and communication technologies are of central importance in this article, and therefore deserve closer examination. Technology doesn't just refer to some apparatus enclosed in a plastic sleeve. It is not just a tool we use, like a little shovel in a sandbox. Technology offers new opportunities, but it also constantly redefines the boundaries between the possible and the impossible.

New communication technologies shape the way we think about communication, and also force us to adopt a new mindset. I will now provide an illustration of how such a new mindset can come into being. While I was writing this paper, my girlfriend was studying in Australia. When we planned to get in touch, we naturally took into account the possibilities afforded by communication technology. This was evidence of our technology-oriented mindset. On the other hand, we would never consider being physically in two places at once, as we know this is impossible. Technology is thus not a passive instrument: By marking the boundary between the possible and the impossible, it structures our mindset.

Sometimes there is an incongruity between the idea the user has and the structure that technology pushes the user into. When such tensions occur, the structuring agency of technology is revealed. One example occurred with one of the many so-called social networking sites, Linkedin. This is a major online service that facilitates more professionally oriented communication in social networks. When I added Hans to my Linkedin network, I had to choose how to label our relationship: "colleague", "classmate", "we've done business together", "friend", "other" or "I don't know Hans." To me, Hans was not really a "friend" or a "colleague," because I also know him personally. The Linkedin system forced me to quantify our relationship with a label I cannot fully agree with, for Hans is more of a social acquaintance with the potential to become a friend than a colleague to me. This is a good example of the agency that technology has. It offers possibilities that *structure* by means of their limitations, and is thus not neutral.

Although this example is focused on Linkedin, such incongruity occurred in the use of many different platforms. For example, in the flow of work, more than one person often wants to work on the same file. When the file is archived in Dropbox, it is accessible to everyone, but it can only be edited by one person at a time. Consequentially we had to move to another platform that allowed multiple users to simultaneously work on the same document. With Google Docs this is possible, but not every SETUP-er had the Google Account needed to access that application. Two final examples: In one smartphone application, Dongwei was connected to one of his Facebook friends, even though he did not want this to happen. And Tom had a problem with the collapse of the boundaries between different social contexts (we will come back to that later).

Frank-Jan introduced me to the term "affordance," which refers to the idea that material things can invite others to engage with them. We tend not to be aware of the fact that the possibilities that technology offers are at the same time limited by the ways that technology is

structured. In the software program Photoshop, for instance, it is very hard to think outside of the system that is "offered." This was indeed the kind of terminology I was looking for. The term "affordance" was coined by the American psychologist James Jerome Gibson. He noted that the physical environment defined possible limits, but that people were still free to make their own choices within those limits (cf. Gibson, 1986).

To extrapolate the term and apply it to technology, the usability engineer Donald Norman wrote a more useful definition: "[…] the perceived and actual properties of the thing, primarily those fundamental properties that determine just how the thing could possibly be used" (Norman, 2002, p. 9). In this definition, affordance is an essential part of the object. But this definition is subject to criticism, for one can argue that technology, as the man-made object, has no agency at all. This argument refers to the "agency versus structure" debate, which I will now briefly describe.

At the two ends of the spectrum of the agency debate are two schools of thought: social constructivism and technological determinism. From the social constructivist's point of view, technology is only a man-made product without any capacity to act. It focuses on design (we make technology). On the other hand, technological determinism assumes that all major changes in society take place because of technological developments (e.g., the Arab Spring was ignited because of the existence of Twitter; cf. De Mul, 2002, pp. 29-33). Jos de Mul, a technology-philosopher, neatly expresses the distinction as follows: According to the instrumental understanding, "technology is a neutral and value-free tool used for different purposes. In contrast, the substantial view states that technological artifacts can never be neutral because they always have specific characteristics" (De Mul, 2002, p. 30).

De Mul introduces the term "technological interactionism": an approach that seeks to avoid the problems of both determinism and constructivism by assuming a constant interaction and mutual influences of heterogeneous factors (De Mul, 2002). During my research, I became increasingly aware of the influence communication technologies have as a result of the incongruity described above. SETUP-ers have the capacity to act, but technology certainly influences the way they think and act by the structure it offers.

Information and communication technologies are new tools to structure and organize our social contacts, but it forces us to do this in certain ways. The agency that technology has lies in the possibilities that it offers: it provides a new social structure and at the same time determines our way of thinking, albeit not in ways that are always congruent with our own ideas (said ideas being an example of agency from a human perspective). Communication technology is therefore not a passive, neutral thing, but instead has an active structuring role.

The last chapter will look at the other side of the equation: how each of the SETUP-ers deal with communication technologies in order to regulate their social surroundings. It will focus on the regulatory role of communication technology as a tool in the interpersonal boundary regulation process.

4. New tools, ancient boundaries

One day, several of the members of the SETUP and myself were discussing a Dutch translation of the Polish manifesto "We, the web kids", written by the Polish writer and commentator Piotr Czerski. The manifesto offers a critical view of the concept of "the Internet."

> We grew up with the Internet and on the Internet. This is what makes us different; this is what makes the crucial, though surprising […] difference: We do not 'surf' and the internet to us is not a "place" or "virtual space." The Internet to us is not something external to reality but a part of it: an invisible yet constantly present layer intertwined with the physical environment. We do not use the Internet, we live on the Internet and along it (Czerski, 2012).

After reading this manifesto, Frank-Jan had goosebumps, and Lara almost started to cry because both of them recognized that it reflected their own perspective. The four of us briefly discussed the piece, for Czerski's described perspective on "the internet" appeared to be a shared point of view.

To SETUP-ers, "the Internet" is not an external space or a monolithic entity. Instead it seems to be a more multifaceted network which is completely interwoven with their daily social lives. It was remarkable to see the extent to which the way they communicate online is consistent with the impression they make in person. For instance: Lara uses a lot of exclamation points, an extension of her active and jumpy character; Dongwei, "the guy you see everywhere", has more than 600 friends on Facebook; the constantly busy Tijmen usually takes three weeks to reply to an email. However, this consistency is illustrated best by the way Tom organizes his social surroundings. He said to me in an interview:

> I try to make a firm distinction between different groups of friends. I have got friends I know from new media, friends I know from High school, and friends I know from my study. […] but when I post a statusupdate on Facebook with a new media subject, I am afraid that my not new media friends will react inappropriately.

For Tom, there is a tension to be found as a consequence of these different social groups collapsing into one group, for instance "Facebook friends" or "Twitter followers". In the same conversation, he explained that he tries to separate these different social contexts online by either using a different Facebookgroup for each social group, or using a specific medium for a specific group (i.e., he uses Twitter only for his new media friends).

Marshall McLuhan, a famous media scholar, argues in "Understanding Media" that technology is an extension of our body (McLuhan, 2001, pp. 5-8). Since online and offline are completely interconnected, this point of view does more justice to the way the SETUP group experiences technology and their social surroundings than the binary distinction between man and technology. There is no rigid distinction between the regulation of social contact offline through attitudes, gestures and word choices, and the regulation of online social contact through platform choice, recontextualization, accessibility, etc.

Defining social boundaries is something that people and societies have been doing since time immemorial, but with new technologies there are new tools at hand to organize the social environment. In line with McLuhan's statement, new communication technologies can be seen as additional tools that are used in the interpersonal boundary regulation process. I have seen many SETUP-ers using the broad scope of technologies in order to define their privacy. For instance, when I asked Tijmen if he could receive e-mail alerts on his phone, he replied:

> No, that would really make me mad. Because some chocolate melted on the speaker of my phone, I do not always hear the ringtone. But I love it, I will just call back later. I don't want people to expect that I will always respond immediately.

Instead of connection, Tijmen's malfunctioning speaker is an excuse for *disconnection*.

I witnessed other examples of SETUP members using the many possibilities of technology to define social boundaries. One regulates contact by making a choice of which communication technologies to use or not use. Frank-Jan and Tijmen deliberately choose not to be disturbed by any notifications, and only check their email, Twitter and Facebook accounts when it suits them. Thomas does not like social media at all, and only uses a limited number of platforms. Tijmen only accepts his "real friends" as Facebook friends, and invites all others to connect on Linkedin.

On the one hand, communication technologies offer SETUP-ers many opportunities to always stay connected. On the other hand, they can also be used to regulate, organize, and shut down social connections. They are additional tools that can be used to define and maintain privacy boundaries in new ways. And in this boundary regulation process, the online behavior of these young techsavvy people appears to be a natural extension of their offline identities. At the very least, this is the case for the SETUP community.

Conclusion

The goal of this research was to acquire in-depth insights into the way young tech-savvy people relate to newly offered opportunities to structure their online and offline social environments. Because of the small number of informants (a total of 17) the external validity of this research only

accounts for this specific situation, and the SETUP community is not a representative sample of "tech-savvy" people. Nevertheless, the in-depth information presented here reflects certain widespread societal issues. Many of us have to deal with communication technologies and the possibilities they offer, and this research provides a good example of how young tech-savvy people incorporate communication technologies into their everyday lives.

I received many answers to the question what role these communication technologies have in the creation of social proximity within SETUP as a community. Answers that forced me to think outside of my existing theoretical framework, and to search for new theories and ideas that would explain the meaning of the data I was gathering. The meaning that communication technology has for members of SETUP is multifaceted, consisting of four levels of meaning. In this conclusion, the practical, symbolic, structuring and regulating role of technology will briefly be described, after which an integrated vision of the way SETUP-ers give meaning to communication technology will be presented.

The first role is a very practical one: communication technology connects SETUP-ers "in the cloud," thus facilitating work-related and non-work related contact through the various online platforms used. They can work where they want and when they want, for these platforms facilitate a workflow that is not strictly bound by space or time.

The second role of communication technology is a bit more difficult to grasp, as it is a symbolic one. Communication technologies are part of the "internet culture and intangible heritage," (e.g., popular movies, games, social media, series and memes). These are shared points of interests that connect the SETUP-ers in negotiating the meaning of this shared knowledge. This symbolic role of communication technology for the community is even underlined by the specific language and humor that have evolved from it. The constant references to the digital culture strongly confirm the feeling of belonging to the SETUP group, and therefore also define those who "don't belong."

Thirdly, communication technology fulfills an structuring role as it gives us the opportunity to stay connected in different ways. On the one hand, it offers possibilities to structure and organize our social surroundings, but on the other hand it forces us to do this in a certain manner. It thus provides a new social structure.

Lastly, communication technology fulfills a regulatory role. They offer us the option to always be reachable, but are an equally important instrument in regulating and shutting off social connections. Communication technology is thus an additional tool that can be used to ensure the maintenance of privacy boundaries.

The fundamental way that SETUP-ers give meaning to communication technology, as it is an extension of their verbal and non-verbal communication, offers them new tools to create balance between connection and disconnection, to disclose as much information as they want, and to organize their social environment beyond the borders of online and offline. Face-to-face, as well as technologically mediated social behaviors, are for SETUP-ers a coherent performance of social and cultural identity.

In conclusion, it is my view that people and technology cannot be researched separately. Instead, an overarching vision allows us to have more in-depth insights into the tension between technology, with all opportunities it offers, and man, as a social being that uses these technologies to organize and control his social boundaries.

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