Transnational Thais: Global Mobilities, Cell Phones, And Collaboration

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Introduction

Computation is moving off of desktops and into pockets, cars, homes and public places. While workplaces will continue to be an important site for collaborative technologies, personal electronic devices now allow mobile, ad-hoc, everyday collaborations in real space. *Urban computing* exhibits an interest in such interactions, but tends to treat The City as a generic location. While recent urban computing projects (Paulos and Goodman, 2004; Paulos and Jenkins, 2005; Mainwaring et al, 2005) have been by necessity located *somewhere*, the phenomena studied have been things that exist just as well in any city, such that findings might be applicable to any city.

Each city, however, is culturally and historically specific in ways that are relevant to technology design (Williams and Dourish, 2006). Cities reflect and reproduce cultural values, and cultural work is done during encounters with cities. Yet most urban computing research has been conducted in New York, San Francisco, London, and Tokyo – charismatic and affluent "global cities" – and focuses on their similarities to each other, rather that on each city's specific characteristics. Can the study of such a narrow range of urban environments really tell us anything about how to design technology for Boise, Lagos, or Bangkok?

With the support of Intel's People and Practices Research Group, I have conducted an ethnography of Thai transnational retirees, focusing on concepts of distributed "home"; collaboration between family members across continents and within a city; how ordinary people use technology to achieve personal and cultural values.

Methodology

Over the course of 3 months, I conducted a multi-sited ethnographic study of transnational Thai retirees and their use of communication technologies, spending approximately 6 weeks in the field. I was a participatnt-observer and engaged informants in semi-structured ethnographic interviews ranging from 45 minutes to 3 hours. I visited their homes, staying overnight or multiple days when possible, and occasionally travelled with my participants. Interviews and home visits took place in and around Seattle, St. Louis, rural Illinois, and New York in the United States, and Bangkok and Chantaburi in Thailand.

Overall, my study included 19 Thai transnational retirees between the ages of 58 and 68, as well as 4 of their children. Most had spent 30-40 years – the bulk of their professional carreer – in the US and raised families there. Their children in
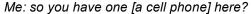
the US are now adults, their parents and older siblings in Thailand are declining in health, and they are ready to retire. Most own a home in each country and migrate approximately yearly, maintaining important ties in both locations. Most of my participants have known each other a long time and worked, attended school, or attended temple together.

This ethnographic engagement was the first phase in an ongoing project. In collaboration with a new pervasive computing group at Sripatum University in Bangkok, I will continue to investigate mobile and communicative technology use in and around Bangkok, with the aim of informing system design.

Findings

I present here only the subset of my findings that are specifically relevent to the «culture and collaborative technologies» theme of this workshop. Of all the technologies discussed in interviews and observed during my engagement, participants attached the most significance to cell phones. As with the use of the Internet in Trinidad to achieve certain cultural ideals (Miller and Slater 2000), cell phones are viewed as *Thai*, or at least a natural fit for a *Thai* lifestyle in a way that is not quite true of the US lifestyle.

> *Me: so you have one [a cell phone] here?*
> *P: Over here, you have to have it. The traffic like this, you can't…. It's difficult. Over there you don't have to have a cell phone. Over here you have to.*
> *Me: what do you use it for?*
> *P: Everything. If I forgot something. Or I call you… where are you? I need help for the directions! And when you get shopping.*

While the cell phone, as a device, may be similar or identical in either Thailand or the U.S., the contexts that give it meaning to its owners are radically different. Several cultural factors are particularly important. First, everyday life in Thailand has traditionally centered around a network of mutual dependency, which includes primarily family, though amongst my participants also included school friends and co-workers. The crucial role of this network is reflected in everyday language: there is no single word for "I" in Thai, it depends on whether you are male or female, older or younger than the person you're talking to, whether the people talking are close, distant, in a clear superior/inferior relationship, etc. While a nuclear family might have their own house, they tended to make efforts to live near extended family, and in some cases (portrayed by participants as traditional and ideal) aunts, uncles and cousins dropped by several times a day. The Thai word for "house" or "home" is also used to mean "village", and especially in smaller towns (though the practice was by no means absent in Bangkok) a family *home* seemed to extend beyond a single *house*. Friends and family are one's most important resources and the cell phone provides constant and convenient access to them.

Second, and in contrast to the trustworthy family-and-friend network, my participants exhibited a deep and abiding distrust of strangers, publics, government and the rule of law. The recent

coup d'etat was the 19th since 1932. Bangkok has almost no sewer system, relying primarily on septic tanks. The police are universally regarded as corrupt, and their low salaries all but necessitate the taking of bribes. An effort to build a citywide SkyTrain in the late 1990's was only partially completed, leaving hundreds of useless concrete support structures scattered around the city as constant reminders of the government's failure. One depends on friends and family because state and civic infrastructures have repeatedly proved themselves unreliable. While the Internet may seem a bit too public for comfort, the cell phone allows users to regulate their connections more; being in touch with the people in your address book is far superior to being in touch with the whole world.

Third, differing patterns of mobility between Thailand and the U.S. led to different roles for cell phones. In interviews, my questions about cell phones would inevitably lead to discussions about the traffic, the car, and about finding one's way around the city. Traffic in Bangkok is ever-present, and I do not mean simply that there are a lot of traffic jams. The Traffic is always on everyone's mind, a frequent topic of conversation. It is discussed a bit like the weather, a force of nature. It is common knowledge that the only traffic-free thoroughfare is the Chao Praya River, and maybe sometimes the tollways. The presence of parking determines *where* you go – and you may choose a place across town over a place nearby based on the presence of parking. The possibility of traffic determines *when* you go, and people will go through great lengths to avoid it. One person arrived at my hotel at 6am in order to avoid morning rush hour. Arrival times are unpredictable, so the phone is considered "necessary" to inform anyone you're meeting of your real, rather than planned, arrival time. You also need it to get driving directions, and you would not use Google maps; it's more fun to talk to your cousin, your cell phone – unlike a laptop with internet – is always with you, and besides, he knows where the construction is happening this week. And if you're going to be in a particular neighborhood, you use it to call your friends there to arrange dinner. That said, I never saw people drive and talk on their phones at the same time –passengers act as intermediaries, navigators, signalers, and blind-spot-checkers.

Challenges

As a locally mobile technology in and around Bangkok and other parts of Thailand, the cell phone is a success. For global mobility, it is a failure. It was typical amongst my participants to use a little black book of phone numbers instead of the phone's contact list. For a group of people that make many of their phone calls internationally using a calling card, the contact list provides no easy way to do so. "Mobile" phones did not travel well overseas because of underlying infrastructure issues, confusion over how to unlock one's phone, etc. Sometimes people switched SIM cards, but quite often they had a phone in each country. In the cases where people had one phone, they always had it for use in Thailand, where it was regarded as much more necessary. Moving forward, designing collaborative systems for use globally or in developing countries must account for infrastructural as well as cultural specificites.

Works cited

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