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The Telephone as a Medium of Faith, Hope, Terror, and Redemption: America, September 11

James E. Katz and Ronald E. Rice

James E. Katz and Ronald E. Rice categorize the use of telephone and cell phones during the crisis and suggest a broader "syntopian" theoretical perspective. They explore how ordinary people used telephone technology (landline, voice answering, mobile phones, PDAs, wireless text) during the tragedy. They document how personal emergency communication was heavily imbued with emotional meaning, with messages addressing major life problems and values, such as leaving final messages and expressing love and concern, and sometimes requiring extreme efforts.

As we have pointed out elsewhere,[1] people view themselves in social situations as humans struggling to meet personal needs and handle social structural exigencies, not as mere operators of one particular type of communication tool. In our enthusiasm to focus on what is new and possibly different, we overlook the fact that these technologies are part of a built environment in and through which people pursue human and social activities. People enjoy using these tools with usually little curiosity about the nature and workings of the tools themselves. This is true no less of the automobile and the range than of the computer and mobile phone. Although we do focus on technology, we seek to show that technology is valued by humans for what it can achieve in terms of enduring social needs and individual inclination rather than for any attribute or feature of the technologies themselves.

Using this framework as a departure point, we will explore some of the ways the telephone, both mobile and fixed, as well as associated technologies such as two-way pagers and other digital interactive electronics, were used on and after September 11. It would be difficult to overestimate the role of the telephone in

modern life despite its near invisibility to scholars of communication.[2] The effects of September 11 on telephone service were felt beyond the New York and Washington areas. Telephone outages occurred as far away as in parts of the Midwest. Wireless communication played a huge role in the response to the tragedy, since it appears that typically one-third of 911 calls originate from cellular phones.[3]

Propositions about September 11 Telephone Use Based on a Syntopian Perspective

We have organized our analysis around eight propositions, which we later explain using a syntopian perspective.

The Telephone Allows Intense Immediacy

Conventional landline telephones

Since the landline phones in the World Trade Center were so robust, people in the building could communicate with those outside until the buildings themselves collapsed. Shortly after the attack began, someone who answered the phone on the trading floor of broker Cantor Fitzgerald, whose offices were near the top of One World Trade Center, was asked what was going on. He said, "We are fucking dying!"[4] John Lugano nearly lost one brother in the attack and days later was still searching for another. Lugano said that he called his brother Sean, twenty-eight, a bond trader at Keefe, Bruyette & Woods, immediately after the first plane rammed the north tower. "I'm okay," Sean said from the south tower. "My floor is ten floors below . . . I'm just watching it." When the second plane hit Sean's building, John again called him at his desk and told him to leave. Sean protested that he was told to stay put, but John said, "Seanny, just get out of there." "Hopefully he listened," John said. Describing Sean's love of rugby—he was former All-American scrumhalf—and physical vigor, Lugano said, "The kid's a tough, tough kid and he's not somebody that ever gives up." Lugano aggressively circulated a flyer throughout Lower Manhattan and made many postings on the Internet in his search for his brother. Sean did not make it out.

A mix of landline and mobile phones

Due to mobile and landline phones, Rick Rescorla was able to stay deeply involved with his wife, Susan, and friends even as the situation at the World Trade Center was rapidly evolving. The telephone enabled them to share extremely tense moments and extend mutual encouragement during the attack. Susan

was at home on the morning of September 11, talking to one of her daughters by phone. Susan then heard her call waiting tone and put her daughter on hold to take the other call. The other caller turned out to be another daughter who was calling from Manhattan, where she lived. "Put on the TV!" Rushing to the TV, Susan saw smoke pouring from the north tower. She hung up the phone and called Rick, whose office was on the seventy-third floor of the south tower, Two World Trade Center. Rick oversaw security for Morgan Stanley and had not even been scheduled for work that day. Susan's call was taken by Rick's coworker, Barbara Williams, who told her not to worry. Although the attack was on the other building, Rick was "out there with the bullhorn now."

Even as Rick was shepherding Morgan Stanley people out, a few refused to heed Rick's call to evacuate immediately after the initial attack on One World Trade Center, including Morgan Stanley managing director Bob Sloss. He was the only employee who did not evacuate the sixty-sixth floor after the first plane hit, pausing instead to make full use of the still functioning telephones. He made calls to his family and several underlings, even taking a call from a *Bloomberg News* reporter.

Meanwhile, Rick called his old army buddy in Florida, Dan Hill. They talked briefly about the attack. Rick said he was going to evacuate the Morgan Stanley people, even though the Port Authority was insisting they not do so. They told him to order people to stay at their desks, Rick fumed. "Everything above where that plane hit is going to collapse, and it's going to take the whole building with it. I'm getting my people . . . out of here," Rick said. After hanging up, Dan resumed his TV watching but within minutes saw another plane swing into view, execute a sharp left turn, and plunge into the south tower. Susan, watching TV in Morristown, saw the maneuver too. She again phoned her husband's office, this time frantically. There was no answer.

At the same time, Bob Sloss reevaluated his decision to stay behind. When the second plane hit, his office walls cracked. Realizing the danger, he began clambering down the stairwells. When he got to the tenth floor, he found Rick Rescorla, sweating through his suit in the heat, telling people they were almost out but making no move to leave himself. Rick had even broken into a patriotic song to give his people heart.[5] At about this time Rick called Susan. When she heard his voice, she burst into tears and could not talk. "Stop crying," he told her. "I have to get these people out safely. If something should happen to me, I want you to know I've never been happier. You made my life." Then he said he had to go.

Rick soon was back on his mobile phone, this time getting in touch with Dan Hill. Rick said he was taking some of his security men and making a final sweep, to make sure no one was left behind, injured, or lost. Then, he said reassuringly, he would evacuate himself. "Call Susan and calm her down," he instructed Mr. Hill. "She's panicking." Rick then began singing "God Bless America" and ended

his phone conversation. Dan quickly called Susan. She herself had just been on the phone seeking reassurance from a family friend in England. Hearing her sobbing loudly, Dan had tried to comfort her. As he was speaking, Susan suddenly gave out a profound shriek of anguish. In Florida, Hill turned to his own television to see the south tower cascading down on itself.[6]

Contact and Reassurance Communication with Primary Social Group Members

Synchronous communication of the end of one's life and the permanence of love

Although wanting to know that others were safe was an extremely important reason for communications during the attack, letting others know they were loved by their special someone was the highest priority, and people tried to accomplish this by any communication means possible. Many messages of love and concern were sent out across landline, mobile phones, pagers, and the Internet that day. Declarations were not frilly, fancy, or creative. They were terse and conventional—and extraordinarily meaningful.

This directness is seen in a September 11 incident related by "RLMF," who worked near the World Trade Center. Her husband, though a New York City firefighter, was supposed to be on vacation that day. She heard about the first crash from her boss. As people gathered before the office windows to watch, the second plane struck. She recalled, "I saw the fireball. I heard the sirens. And that's when it hit me: My husband is a New York City fireman." Her panic was allayed somewhat because she knew he was off duty that week, but then she also remembered he was in the city for a meeting. "How on earth do I get in touch with him?" she wondered. Then what she describes as a miracle happened. The phone rings. "He is calling me from a pay phone twenty blocks away. He tells me, 'I'm on my way to the firehouse. I have to help.'" But RLMF pleads with him, "Don't go. You're on vacation. You could be killed." He tells her, "You know I have to. I can't leave my brothers alone out there; they will need all the help they can get." RLMF starts to cry but her husband interrupts her. "Say it." "Say what?" RLMF asks. "I can't go until you say it, like you always do." RLMF: "I squeak out the words that I say to him every time I leave him, 'Be good, Behave, Be careful—I love you always.'" Abruptly the line went dead.[7]

Bob Lynch, of Cranford, New Jersey, who helped supervise the elevators at the World Trade Center, called his wife, Elisabeth, right after the first plane hit. She recalls, "He was in the (outdoor) plaza. He told me he loved me, that he was okay." Lynch then reentered the burning building to help others escape; he perished.[8] The telephone also allowed a mother and daughter to share their last minutes together. In the case of Olabisi Shadie Layeni-Yee, the situation

on September 11 was doubly poignant. Layeni-Yee worked at the World Trade Center in 1993, when it was bombed by terrorists. Her mother had watched that event unfold on television but had no idea what was going on with her daughter. Hours dragged by as the event was covered live on local TV. Finally she got a call from her daughter. "Mom, I'm fine;" she had been helping a pregnant woman walk down from the seventy-ninth floor. On September 11, things were different. On that morning, the mother's phone rang. It was her daughter. She urged her mother to turn on the TV and quickly told her the situation, concluding with the words, "If worse comes to worst, I'm just calling to say good-bye to all of you." Then she told her mother that the lights were going out and the floor was buckling. The mother turned around quickly toward the TV screen; it was a long shot of the tower collapsing.[9]

Answering machines and enduring immediacy

The telephone answering machine and voice messaging allowed some to receive a message that they would otherwise have missed, and has continued to give enduring meaning and a sense of emotional immediacy to the lives and relationships that were destroyed that day. When disaster struck that day, executive Melissa Hughes, who was working on the 101st floor of One World Trade Center, tried to reach her husband but only got his answering machine. (Hughes shared the recording with the news media, which then posted it on the web.) Against a background of pandemonium one can hear Melissa, gasping for breath and sobbing, "A bomb—or an airplane—has hit the building—I just wanted you to know—that I love you—always."

Lauren Grandcolas, aboard the hijacked plane above Pennsylvania, used her mobile phone to speak with her husband, Jack. Making a quick cell phone call before the plane crashed, she said, "We have been hijacked. They are being kind. I love you." A week or so after September 11, a reporter called the Grandcolas family. The reporter was nonplussed to hear the bright greeting: "Hi! Lauren and Jack aren't available. Leave us a message. Thanks!" No, she is not available, thought the reporter, she is spread over a scorched hill in Pennsylvania. Her voice, though, was still at home, welcoming callers. The reporter tried the number of another victim. There a telephone answering machine picked up his call. The pleasant-sounding woman's voice explained that Ian and Christine couldn't take the call, please leave a message. The reporter commented that Christine would never be able to take the call, as she too was killed by the hijackers. Trying back later, he reached Christine's husband, Ian Pescaia. He said he had not intentionally left the message on the machine. He explained to the reporter, "I haven't had a chance to go get another tape . . . It's just the only tape. And I didn't want to erase it."[10] As one columnist said, "When all that's left of your loved one is a voice on the answering machine, how can you hit delete?"[11]

Shared last words and thoughts

Last words: We who are about to die love you. Clearly many messages dispatched by pager, e-mail, and voice mail were eventually received. Probably many more were never received. There has already been serious probing of incompletely crushed and melted computer drives extracted from the World Trade Center rubble.[12] Although to date these efforts have been directed at looking for evidence of criminal intent, there is doubtless a large volume of personal messages and information as well.

Lee Hanson's son Peter, his wife, Sue Kim Hanson, and their two-year-old daughter Christine were killed September 11 when their flight, United Flight 175, crashed into the World Trade Center. Peter, thirty-two, used his cell phone to call his parents in Easton, Connecticut, moments before his plane hit the south tower. "The fact that he called me—he could have called any number of people," Mr. Hanson said. "I take a lot of comfort in that. He thought enough to do that."[13]

But even without the mobile phone, a constant in human affairs seems to be that at the end of life, getting and giving reassurance is important. Primo Levi, when he recounted his experience in the Nazi death camps, noted that the last wish of those who were about to be put to death was simply to get a word through to their family. That was all they wanted, he said, and would try any means possible to smuggle word in or out. Just confirmation that the family might be okay and that the condemned loved them, Levi recalled.[14]

Communication Technologies Used to Seek Information, Reassurance, and Establish Contact

Adam Mayblum was in the north tower, which was struck by the first airplane. His office, located below the point of impact, lurched back and forth ten or more feet. Light fixtures and the ceiling collapsed and smoke began billowing through holes in the ceiling. No one dreamed an airplane had struck their building; rather, many thought a bomb had gone off. He thought the worst was over. Like many others in an emergency situation, his thoughts turned to his family. He found that the phones were working. He relates, "My wife had taken our nine-month-old for his checkup. I called my nanny at home and told her to page my wife, tell her that a bomb went off, I was okay and on my way out. We were moving down very orderly in staircase A. Very slowly. No panic. At least not overt panic. My legs could not stop shaking. My heart was pounding. Some nervous jokes and laughter. We checked our cell phones. Surprisingly, there was a very good signal, but the Sprint network was jammed. I heard that the BlackBerry two-way email devices worked perfectly. On the phones, one out of twenty dial attempts got through. I knew I could not reach my wife so

I called my parents. I told them what happened and that we were all okay and on the way down. Soon, my sister-in-law reached me. I told her we were fine and moving down. I believe that was about the sixty-fifth floor. We were bored and nervous. I called my friend Angel in San Francisco. I knew he would be watching. He was amazed I was on the phone. He told me to get out, that there was another plane on its way. I did not know what he was talking about. By now, the second plane had struck tower 2. We were so deep into the middle of our building that we did not hear or feel anything. We had no idea what was really going on. We kept making way for the wounded to go down ahead of us."[15] Note that Mayblum and those around him, though in the bowels of the World Trade Center in New York, only got the first inkling of what had happened through talking by mobile phone to someone in San Francisco.

Magdalen Powers commented that what affected her most deeply was not the "screaming horror" of the World Trade Center collapse. Rather, when she went to back to her job at a New York City hospital, people would dial her office searching for their missing loved ones. "It's the helplessness and utter inadequacy I feel when I transfer them to the person with the list—the person I know probably won't be able to help them either." Callers would tell her that they had tried every other hospital. "I just try, as much as I can, to sound kind, sound compassionate, sound calm, and let them hope just a few seconds more."

A former U.S. Air Force servicewoman in Nevada, two time zones behind New York, recalls getting a call at 7 A.M. "The phone rang. I slowly pull my growing, pregnant body out of bed and to the phone. Who would be calling me this early? An old air force buddy is on the other line. His voice is slightly quivering. 'Wendy, turn on the news, America is being attacked.' . . . Suddenly, I feel my whole body shudder as I wonder where my daughter is at this moment. Anna is only three years old. She's spending the summer with her dad at the air force base that he is stationed at. I begin to panic with the possibility that the base could be a potential target. I immediately grab the phone again and call down there. No answer . . . I want her off that base. I want her home. I thought about making the four-hour drive to go pick my daughter up . . . but at nearly six months pregnant, I am in no condition to make the drive alone. Finally, the phone rings again. A familiar voice on the other line. It's my ex-husband's girlfriend reassuring me that Anna is okay. She was at day care."[16]

Transmission of Both Information and Affect Are Highly Important, and Users May Be Extraordinarily Sensitive to Nuances

Telephoning facts and feelings

Tom Burnett, aboard the doomed United Airlines flight above Pennsylvania, used his mobile phone to alert both his family and the authorities. When

he reached his family, who lived in a suburb of San Francisco, his wife, Deena, was in the middle of making breakfast for their three girls. The call took her aback, and Tom sounded odd, she thought. She asked, "Are you okay?" "No," was his reply. Speaking in a quick, low voice he said, "I'm on a plane, it's United Flight 93, and we've been hijacked. They've knifed a guy, and there's a bomb on board. Call the authorities, Deena." Then he hung up.[17]

Cherri Simmons, who lives in Salt Lake City, shows how important and nuanced telephone communication can be. She wrote in an online commentary that she was sleeping late on her day off work when was she was awakened by the phone. She said, "It was my daughter-in-law telling me to turn on the TV. Just as I turned the set on and awoke my husband, we both watched in horror at the gaping hole and smoke in the first tower and then watched the crash of the second tower. I ran to the phone to call all my eight grown children. I felt desperate to hear the sound of their voices. I called them for reassurance, and it took me by surprise how devastated they were."[18]

BlackBerry® allows text to transcend voice

The BlackBerry® and other handheld wireless e-mail devices, like two-way pagers, served as lifelines to friends and loved ones and workmates, and as a way to stay in contact with the office. Lawyer Christopher Karras was at a meeting in an office near the World Trade Center when they heard and felt the first crash. Rushing to the windows, they saw hundreds of people scurrying below. Like others in the room, Karras said his first impulse was to tell his family he was okay. He reached for his BlackBerry wireless e-mail unit. "I don't even remember picking up a landline," said Mr. Karras. He typed a brief message to his wife in Minneapolis and his assistant in Philadelphia. The message dated 8:58 A.M., September 11, said, "We are three blocks from the crash. Heard the plane go by and hit. All here OK."[19]

People without hearing were able to use their mobile technology for text-based communication to reassure friends around the world in the midst of the horror. Susan Zupnik and Carl Andreasen, thirty-seven, both deaf employees of the Port Authority, were breakfasting in a cafeteria on the forty-third floor of the north tower. "Suddenly, my face was thrown against a window," Zupnik told a reporter. She then saw debris falling down outside the windows. People were screaming around her, but she could hear nothing. "I threw my bagel on the floor and ran out," she says. Zupnik had an AOL mobile communicator, a device she purchased only months earlier that allows her to send and receive text messages. She keyed in a message to a friend, an administrator at the New Jersey Institute of Technology, that something was wrong. Then she received a news bulletin over her pager—a plane had hit the World Trade Center. As she slowly made her way down the stairs, the communicator buzzed constantly. Friends from all over the world—in California and Maryland and Ireland and South Africa and England—were asking whether she was safe. "I'm on the twenty-sixth floor," she punched on the tiny keyboard to answer one concerned note and continued her escape.[20]

Use of Telecommunication Technology Leaves Important Residues that Reveal Complex Communicative Interactions

Using telecommunication technologies inevitably leaves residues because the modern telecommunications infrastructure involves many computers, with associated store-and-forward capacities and with complex abilities to track message flow for both billing and system optimization purposes. After the fact, these residues can be used to reconstruct communication interactions and messages. For example, numerous pictures were made of some of the hijackers using ATM machines, going through airport security, and entering newsstands.

News outlets carried hopeful stories that perhaps someone with a mobile phone could call for help from under the rubble. Perhaps, it was thought, even if the individual were unconscious, the mobile phone could still generate signals that would enable rescue. A man caught under the rubble used his mobile phone to contact his family in Pennsylvania for help. An emergency coordinator from Allegheny County said that the family member had "received a call from him saying he was still trapped under the World Trade Center. He gave specific directions and said he was there along with two New York City sergeants." Unfortunately reports of this nature were later shown to be spurious.[21] One journalist who traveled to Ground Zero on September 11 said that according to firefighters, neither the raucous noises of rescue nor the rare silences were the most moving sounds. Rather, the eeriest sound of all was mobile phones and pagers ringing underneath the debris as loved ones frantically tried to find and contact those missing.[22]

New Social Relationships and Arrangements Emerge around the Use and Nonuse of New Media

When confronted by disaster, people usually band together, overcoming preexisting social barriers. In studies of telephone service breakdowns, people share their limited resources and turn to neighbors; friendships and community spirit develops.[23]

Unsurprisingly, parallel instances arose during September 11. A young man relates how he and a previously unknown neighbor befriended each other as they stood on their Manhattan tenement roof watching events unfold. "After exchanging a few scant phrases of disbelief (after all, what could one say?), he

invited me down through his window to use his phone. (Like most New Yorkers, mine was nearly useless for most of the day.) I called my mother back in Michigan."[24] Bill Singer, an attorney who was escaping Ground Zero by foot, noted scores of individuals milling about, sobbing. "They often held cell phones. They cried that they couldn't reach their husband, their brother, their father, their sister, their mother, their friends. And strangers would simply walk up to them, put their arms around them, comfort them."[25]

Users Can Be Highly Creative in Developing Ad Hoc Solutions and Crossing Media Boundaries

People are primarily concerned about the goals and processes of communication, not the technology. Thus people were creative in their use of available telecommunication technology to solve their immediate needs. When their first communication channel was blocked, they tried the next available alternative. If the plausible alternatives failed, they would begin cobbling together their own patchwork and fallback systems to get messages to loved ones, no matter how. For example, they would use one technology to get a message dispatched via another if necessary, as illustrated by this e-mail message:

> From: Jennie Diluvio
> Sent: Tues, September 11, 2001 10:03 AM
> To: [several e-mail addresses]
> Subject: OH MY GOD.....
> THE TOWER IS DOWN!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
> Drew, call mom and dad. I don't know if they remember I'm not there . . .

One mother was vacationing at the Habitat in Bonaire, when a friend ran to her group and said, "They're bombing America." A few moments of watching TV in the open-air bar panicked her, as her daughter might have skipped school and gone shopping at Pentagon City. "Running for a telephone proved to be a futile proposition. There were simply no lines available. Instead, I bought a forty-five-minute Internet card and stuck myself at the Internet kiosk in the lobby at Habitat. While I was frantically e-mailing, the first tower of the World Trade Center imploded onto hundreds of rescue workers . . . . Within ten minutes I got the answer I was waiting for from my ex-husband. Morgan and everyone else I knew was fine. That information was priceless."[26]

People also used telephone communication for command-and-control purposes as victims sought to influence their fate. Amazingly, there was considerable coordination between passengers on the aircraft and their loved ones on the ground. The case of Mrs. Alice Hoglan is instructive in this regard. Even though Hoglan's efforts did not bear fruit, they highlight impressive courage and presence of mind that people involved in the tragedy brought to bear on the

situation. Hoglan had been phoned by her son, Mark Bingham, who was a passenger on the doomed UAL plane, while the hijacking was in progress. She called him back at 9:54 A.M. and left two messages on his cell phone's voice mail. She urged him and the other passengers to rush the cockpit because the flight appeared to be a suicide mission. Her son apparently never got the messages. Nonetheless, the messages, later retrieved from the phone company, are instructive as to what Mrs. Hoglan was trying to accomplish: "Mark, apparently it's terrorists and they're hell-bent on crashing the aircraft. So, if you can, try to take over the aircraft. There doesn't seem to be much plan to land the aircraft normally, so I guess your best bet would be to try to take it over if you can, or tell the other passengers. There is one flight that they say is headed toward San Francisco. It might be yours. So, if you can, group some people and perhaps do the best you can to get control of it. I love you, sweetie. Good luck. Good-bye."[27]

Emergency Can Create an Opportunity for the Misuse of Communication Technologies

The telephone, mobile phone, and Internet enabled many things to take place that otherwise might not have happened on September 11, for both good and bad. Indeed, the attack on the World Trade Center was organized and implemented at least partly through mobile communication. The terrorists also communicated between planes by mobile phone as they sat on the tarmac that fateful morning.

As noted above, there were many false reports of mobile phone messages being received from people trapped under the wreckage of the World Trade Center. Although some of these reports to authorities were believed to be correct at the time by the callers, they were often caused by people's misunderstanding of signaling and confirmation records, and a few were malicious. It was important to investigate the validity of these signals before dispatching rescue workers to risk their lives in an attempt to save people who were already dead. Someone claimed that her husband had called her on his mobile phone, and this led rescue workers to risk their lives to follow up what turned out to be a false claim. Sadly, despite great hopes and huge efforts, no one was saved from the rubble because of mobile signals or other wireless signaling technology. One woman, Sugeil Mejia, was sentenced to three years in jail for leading rescue workers on a wild goose chase through the rubble of the World Trade Center. She had fabricated a story that her husband, who she said was a police officer, and ten colleagues, had contacted her by mobile phone from the depths of the rubble several days after the September 11 attack. But within minutes of beginning a rescue attempt, the emergency workers had to flee for fears the surrounding buildings were about to collapse.[28]

Many people began using their mobile phones to commemorate the September 11 incident, but not always in the way we would expect. In what was interpreted as an anti-American gesture, a graphic began circulating among mobile phone users in the Middle East. The message was described by the *Economist* as appealing to "terrorist sympathizers" throughout the Middle East. The graphic, which can be easily sent on the advanced phones commonly used in Europe and the Middle East, shows a crude airplane crashing into a skyscraper. The caption, in Arabic, was "It hit and did not miss."[29]

A Syntopian Perspective

This chapter explores how ordinary people (and a few extraordinary ones) used telecommunications to address their situation and needs during the terror attack on New York City and Washington. It does this within a general theoretical perspective called "syntopia." Syntopia emphasizes the human uses and social consequences of telecommunication technologies in modern society. It avoids a mandatory ideological perspective (whether historical determinism, postmodernism, or technological determinism), instead embracing an empirical-pragmatic tradition.[30]

We chose the word "syntopia" for several reasons. First, an important aspect of the syntopia concept is that new media such as the Internet or mobile phones are part of a much larger synthesis of communication and social interaction. People's physical and social situation and history influence their actions online or over the air or wires, and what they learn and do there spills over to their real-world experiences. The term syntopia underscores this synergy across media and between mediated and unmediated activities. Second, the term syntopia draws together the words "syn" and "utopia." Derived from ancient Greek, the word means literally "together place," which is how we see the Internet and associated mobile communication and its interaction with unmediated interpersonal and community relations. Third, the term syntopia invokes both utopian and dystopian visions of what new media such as the Internet and mobile telephony does and could mean.

Conclusion

Why is it worthwhile examining telecommunication technology, especially telephone-based media, in the context of the September 11 terror attack? Analyzing human behavior at the extreme can illuminate a great deal about what people value, what they feel they need to commit themselves to, and what their

lives might mean to themselves and to others, regardless of the specific communication medium they use.

The particularly dramatic, tragic, and devastating event of September 11 provides many examples of how new communication technologies both represent and shape syntopia—a dynamic social context where media are used for diverse human purposes, often in combination with other media, both intentionally and unintentionally, both in expected and unexpected ways, to communicate intense emotions and immediacy as well as objectively command and control information, for ill and for good.

Our examples have suggested a variety of propositions about new media—especially telephonic media—that emphasize aspects of communication that more traditional media theories have overlooked. While we know that media can convey different kinds of social and nonverbal cues, in this extreme situation the telephone and related media were used for the most intense and immediate expressions (proposition 1). People get to speak their last words, telling others before they die that they love them. It allowed one to summarize one's life and preserve one's message, even if the intended recipient was not there to answer the phone (propositions 2 and 3). It also allowed those experiencing the devastation to communicate their situation to others outside, or for outside family and friends to provide information that was not directly available to those experiencing the attacks, along with subtle nuances (proposition 4). Computer-based media collect and provide residues, both message content and meta-data about the message process and participants, which can be used to reconstruct complex social interactions in the midst of devastation (proposition 5). And the use of such media, including situations where such media cannot be used to accomplish the initial communicative goal, provide opportunities for new social relations to develop, both because of shared information and interdependence, but also as an occasion for shared experiences (proposition 6). Central to a syntopian perspective, people with specific communication needs find ways to combine and integrate different media to overcome obstacles and achieve their social, informational, and emotional goals (proposition 7). What appear to be specific media are part of an increasingly interconnected web of communicative possibilities, and apparent boundaries between media are often artifactual. At the same time, the modern tools of technology, including mobile phones and jet aircraft, could be used for deception as well as tremendous destruction (proposition 8).

The insidiousness of a bin Laden in his boastful recounting of how he had tuned to an American news broadcast to hear how the attack was unfolding and the transcendent courage of a Rick Rescorla in his communication with his wife show many supremely social and complex aspects of the relationship between people and their technology. The uses of telephone technology as a medium of faith, hope, terror, and redemption in the September 11 event is

not determined by material forces, but by the interrelations among the uses and capabilities of society's media, and by the heart, spirit, and emotional and social needs of humankind.

Notes

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