
Kluwer Mediation Blog

Is there an App for that?

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Just remember – you heard it here first: we are witnesses to the birth and education of a new species (or sub-species): “Homo Appiens”. The identifiable characteristics of this species is the tendency to require, or at least prefer, a mobile application – an App – to underpin the regular incidents of daily life – finding stuff, locating oneself, remembering things, gathering and sorting information, providing entertainment, taking photos, updating trivial information from friends, communicating with fellow Appiens, tracking one’s mood and wellbeing . . . What is intriguing is the speed with which the species and their devices have emerged from the evolutionary pool and the power that Apps hold over thought, action, knowledge and interaction.

I confess to an irony in writing this note about the invasion of the Apps – using an App while writing on an App-laden tablet computer in a café. And I’ll later use an App version of WordPress to upload the results to this Kluwer blog. But this is not a Luddite rant against the technology; rather, it’s part of an exploration in integration between the mediator’s tools of conversation and dialogue and the device-based tools of Homo Appiens.

An earlier conversation set me thinking about this: in the Faculty common room of my former university I noted one of the administrative staff tapping away at a mobile phone; and inquiries revealed that she was “on” Facebook, Bebo, MySpace, and email (at least). When I asked how she used all these platforms, she said (probably with some pity) that it was to keep in touch with friends – most of whom were in the same city. What I further inquired as to why she might not prefer to go to meet these friends for a coffee she said there’d be no point in that: all of the information that might be conveyed over coffee was already there on her phone. Call me old fashioned if you like, but it seems to me that there’s something more to conversation than information!

The more immediate provocation for this comment is the email exchange (true, we didn’t actually talk with each other) among a group of friends who cycle together on a regular basis. Following the tragic death of three cyclists on our roads in as many days, the conversation then turned to ways of making sure that “first responders” would know whom to call in the event that one of our group was incapacitated – and riding alone (or indeed engaged in any other solo risky activity). The first – and no doubt sensible – solution was to turn to a globally accepted convention going by the initials “ICE”: In Case of Emergency. The suggestion here is to enter names of next of kin or first contacts under those letters, ICE, in one’s mobile phone contacts list. First responders would know, it was said, where to look and what that would mean.

Alongside this contacts-list option, the conversation turned to the next obvious suggestion: there has to be an App for that. And indeed there is – not just one, but dozens! Each of the Apps offers various options for personal and critical data entry (blood group, allergies, next of kin and so on). And they range in cost from free to a few dollars.

Two problems, however, may frustrate these plans: most people have locked screens on mobile phones; and there's a pretty good chance that, if you're injured in a cycling accident, your phone will also be damaged.

So . . . Plan B: wearing bracelets containing personal details (as before), next of kin details and so on. This plan is likely to be implemented, once choices about colour preferences and wrist size are resolved.

But one option that didn't get the same air time – and seems the simplest – is just to carry a card in your wallet or purse with that information. I'll do that.

The point of this for our purposes, as mediators, communicators, facilitators? At the heart of what we seek to do is dialogue and connection, and – even as a heavy duty technology and App user – I am concerned about the potential impact of App-dependence on the essentials of human engagement. It's perhaps no accident that, alongside this technological development there are moves to reinvent, rediscover, and protect the art of conversation. Consider, as just one example, the work of Oxford historian Theodore Zeldin in his book, *Conversation: How Talk Can Change our Lives* and in the “Oxford Muse” dinners that he has initiated: <http://www.oxfordmuse.com/?q=conversation-dinners>. There is also a parallel, and perhaps more elevated, discussion in political philosophy – to which I'll return in another blog – on the central role of dialogue, deliberation and public conversation, and on the ways in which mediation might actually create the conditions for a civil justice dialogue. Aristotle would no doubt be bemused at the thought that we somehow needed to reinvent what is most basic to social solidarity.

While Apps, and the Internet's resources to which they provide one form of access, are astonishingly useful tools, the concern I have is that the “device” (phone, tablet, laptop etc) becomes the interface between those who might otherwise be conversational partners. I note this especially in my negotiation and mediation classes in which it has required quite some retraining of participants to keep their noses out of those devices while apparently in the middle of a negotiation.

There's a larger sociopolitical issue here involving the two faces of our richly rewarding power to connect immediately with those who are physically at a distance, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the socially fragmenting capacity to connect with those distant others who share singular values. As Merlyna Lim comments: “The Internet appeals to isolated individuals by helping them to connect with people worldwide with whom they share some commonality. It also leads these individuals to spend more time with this de-territorialized community at the expense of interaction with their immediate physical environments. In cyberspace, communities are no longer tied to nations . . .” [*Islamic Radicalism and Anti-Americanism in Indonesia: The Role of the Internet*, (East-West Centre, Washington, 2005), 44]

Given the accessibility and obvious utility of the App-world and the Internet, the question most usefully asked by one of the more prolific commentators on the sociology of networks, Manuel Castells, is perhaps the simplest: what's the “cultural glue” holding this networked, App-accessed

society together; what – he asks – is the “ethical foundation of informationalism”? (see *The Rise of the Network Society*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2nd ed, 2010, p. 213).

The answer to that, I think, is – appropriately for mediators – not substantive, but procedural: it’s the fostering of our capacity for dialogue. But of course there’s another relationship involved here: in addition to the relationships “at the table”, there is now, for Homo Appiens, the relationship that s/he has with technology and – as is suggested in some quarters – a willingness to allow the technology to decide for us, all the more so if we regard many of those decisions as technical-managerial. We are, as Even Selinger suggests, citing sociologist Steve Fuller, now “Humanity 2.0, primed for optimization through commercial upgrades”: <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/03/why-its-ok-to-let-apps-make-you-a-better-person/254246/> and <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2011/sep/25/steve-fuller-time-for-humanity>

Homo Appiens can still take heart, to the extent that we explore what commentators have called the “vulnerable potential” of the technology to enhance communication and participation. This, after all, is becoming increasingly important in the world of online dispute resolution. At the end of the day, however, it does seem to come back to finding new ways of fostering rather than avoiding, one of the attributes that makes us human: our engagement with others in dialogue, even – or especially – if it’s difficult. As Bohm, Factor and Garrett suggest:

“Dialogue, as we are choosing to use the word, is a way of exploring the roots of the many crises that face humanity today. It enables inquiry into, and understanding of, the sorts of processes that fragment and interfere with real communication between individuals, nations and even different parts of the same organization. In our modern culture men and women are able to interact with one another in many ways: they can sing dance or play together with little difficulty but their ability to talk together about subjects that matter deeply to them seems invariably to lead to dispute, division and often to violence. In our view this condition points to a deep and pervasive defect in the process of human thought.” [D Bohm, D Factor, and P Garrett, (1991) ‘Dialogue – a proposal’ http://www.infed.org/archives/e-texts/bohm_dialogue.htm]

And there isn’t an App for that . . . oops, there are: Apps that provide “conversation starters” and instruct on creating “powerful” conversations. It had to happen.

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