"Not without my Cell Phone": Preliminary Reflections to a Communicative Theological Anthropology

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1. By Way of an Introduction

It is generally accepted that the new technologies are putting our certainties into doubt, rearranging our dominant cultural narratives, and presenting us with unexpected challenges and opportunities. Therefore, it is obvious that the emergence of a new technology brings to the fore more wide-ranging questions concerning the relationship between technology and society. There are several models attempting to explore this relationship[1]. However, in order to clarify the particular epistemological framework through which we prefer to study the cell phone, we will first refer to the two most prevalent ones: (a) technological determinism and (b) the theory of the social domestication of technology. After having established our epistemological framework, we will then focus on the basic social uses of the cell phone, as recorded in two guiding studies – (a) Rich Ling, The Mobile Connection[2], and (b) Heather Horst and Daniel Miller, *The Cell Phone*[3]. We will conclude our presentation with

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1. For a brief but informative description of those models, see P. Petridis, *Ψηφιακὰ Ἀρχεῖα καὶ Πρακτικὲς Ἀνταλλαγῆς: Μία Ἀνθρωπολογικὴ Προσέγγιση τῶν Ὁμότιμων Δικτύων*, PhD, Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences, Department of Social Anthropology, Athens 2011, pp. 37-74.

2. R. Ling, *The Mobile Connection: The Cell Phone's Impact on Society*, Elsevier – Morgan Kaufman's Publishers, San Francisco, CA 2004.

3. H. Horst & D. Miller, *The Cell Phone: An Anthropology of Communication*, Berg, Oxford/

an indicative theological critique of the cell phone's documented social uses – we wish to propose this critique as a sort of "prolegomena" to a communicative theological anthropology.

2. The Cell Phone Which is not a Knife

Let's start by challenging a stereotype, which stubbornly recurs in most discussions about technology: that the latter is "neutral" in itself; and that it therefore resembles a knife: You can cut a slice of bread with a knife, but you can also cut a human throat; the same goes for technology, depending on how you use it, either for a "good" reason or a "bad" one.

The argument is painfully naive, for at least three reasons: Firstly, because it is both *unhistorical* and *ahistorical*. We know of no society, culture or era, in which technology has been used only for "good" or "evil" purposes. On the contrary, the history of mankind bear witness to an exhaustive exploitation of all the possibilities that technology offers without exception and completely independently of their "positive" or "negative" aspects. To put it simply, this means that in the course of its history, technology has proven to be a force that is both benevolent and malevolent, beneficial and harmful, creative and destructive – and no era has ever managed to "moralize" this force, separating its "good" from its "bad" side.

The second reason why the aforementioned argument should be considered naive is that it turns the elephant into an ant: it reduces technology to a small tool, which is completely subject to the human hand. But technology is not such a tool at all. It is rather a Mega-Machine, largely autonomous from the human hand and uncontrolled by it. We could argue at this point that technology is an unimaginably huge and complex structure; it sometimes gives the impression of growing in its own, separate sphere, that *has its own life*, and inscribes within possibilities unforeseeable even for its own human constructor:

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possibilities that risk to deprive it of any notion of *agency*. This particular conception of the relationship between technology and society –also known as *technological determinism*– generally offers the first place to the technological development, believing that the latter determines absolutely, unambiguously, and linearly the social configuration[4]. Obviously, such a view is not without its problems; but it sets a strong barrier against the simplistic technology-machine isomorphism, and sharply formulates the question whether technology is really subject to human control or whether it is itself a control mechanism[5].

Finally, the third reason why we think that the above isomorphism should be abandoned, is because it presupposes in abstracto a collective subject, which simply does not exist: technology is never used by "people" in a general and vague sense, but by specific social groups, in given historical circumstances, to serve their specific goals or interests. In this sense, what constitutes "good" and "bad" use of technology must always be considered in close connection with the question: To which social group does technology "belong", who owns the means of its production and reproduction and what interests does it have to defend in each case? Something that one social group perceives as "good" use of technology may be considered as "bad" by a social group that is in competition with the first one – this, we believe, is dead obvious. For example, the political or economic elite of a country may perceive the electronic surveillance of its citizens as a "good" use of technology. However, the citizens of that country are unlikely to agree with such an assessment. A plastics

4. Ling, *op.cit.*, p. 23.

5. The main criticism that has been levelled at the theory of technological determinism is that it represents technology in an almost mythical way, as if it was born directly from the head of Jupiter. No technology, however, was ever born from the head of Jupiter, but always within specific social contexts, which, in turn, determine its use. This means that different societies are appropriating and interpretating technology in various ways, constantly discovering new –and often unexpected– ways of using it (Ling, *op.cit.*, p. 24). The theory of *technological determinism* has another disadvantage: it operates at such a high level of abstraction and generalization, that it is not subject to the criterion of verifiability (in this respect, it bears striking similarities to the theory of *moral determinism*). Moreover, how is it possible to make a totalizing and *ex cathedra* judgement on technology without first having adequately analyzed its numerous social uses? How can one try to synthesize without having previously carried out an analysis?

manufacturing company will welcome as "good" use of technology that allows them to produce them – and, consequently, to increase their profits. However, judging by the devastating effects that non-biodegradable material has on the environment, it is almost certain that many environmental organizations will accuse the above company of using the technology in a "bad" way. In the light of this, we are seeking to abandon in this presentation from the outset any unambiguous and essentialist view of technology by choosing as the epistemological framework for its analysis *the social domestication theory* of technological objects – i.e., the idea that to understand the structure and function of the cell phone, we should abandon the macro-level of totalizing philosophical frameworks, and shift to the study of the specific ways in which the various subjects integrate cell phones into their daily lives. To use Erving Goffman's terminology, we would say that studying cell phones from the perspective of social domestication theory means studying the practices through which subjects are gradually "appropriating" the cell phone, by making it part of their personal identity, and also of their "social presentation of their selves"[6].

The questions that will guide our research from now on are not philosophical or deontological in nature (What "is" a mobile phone? What "should be" its appropriate use?) but strictly *descriptive*: What people do with their mobile phones? What functions does it perform in their daily lives? What needs does it meet? How does it relate to their self-image and public appearance? We will try to answer these questions, not by speculating down on and *ex cathedra*, but by summarizing the findings of sociological and ethnographic research as recorded in the relevant literature.

6. See E. Goffman, *Ἡ παρουσίαση τοῦ ἑαυτοῦ στὴν καθημερινὴ ζωή*, transl. Maria Gkofra, Alexandria Publications, Athens 2006.

3. Basic Social Uses of the Cell Phone

3.1. Security and Safety

The first –and perhaps most important– reason why people use cell phones is that they provide them with an increased sense of security and safety[7]. We say "sense" because, as we will see below, this security is subject to specific conditions and cannot be considered "objective". However, even if they are not secure in an "objective" sense, people feel safe with their cell phones because they believe that they allow them to never be alone: If something unexpected happens, they can always contact someone they know, asking for help[8].

Of course, we know that this possibility sometimes takes on dramatic proportions – as happened, for example, in the case of 11th of September, 2001: the call for help was combined –tragically– with the final farewells of the passengers to their families and loved ones[9]. However, it is not necessary for us to resort to national tragedies and plane crashes to understand that the potential presence of others through cell phones has enormous practical benefits. For example, let us consider how reassuring mobile phones are for two working parents who are forced to leave their children alone at home for many hours[10]. Again, how much can a cell phone alleviate the anxiety of an elderly, disabled, or mentally ill person who is in need of constant supervision and care? Through the mobile phone, parents can give instructions to their children about their meals and clothing, or help them with their schoolwork. Similarly, vulnerable or sick persons have the ability to communicate at any time with their supervising doctor or psychologist. In such cases, as in many similar ones, the mobile phone literally functions as a mechanical *babysitter*, providing care and guidance to people who are (potentially or actually) in need.

7. Ling, *op.cit.*, p. 35.
8. Ling, *op.cit.*, p. 36.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Cf. Ling, *op.cit.*, pp. 62-63.

3.2. Coordination of Meetings – Mobilizations

Mobile phones have proven to be extremely helpful in organizing and reorganizing our daily meetings[11]. It is common knowledge for most of us that the appointments made by landline telephone or by verbal agreement alone, are usually inflexible and difficult to change. One of the cell phone's greatest advantages is that it "softens" the inflexible nature of these appointments and allows for their continuous renegotiation: In the event of an unforeseen circumstance (e.g., a delay), we have the option of rescheduling the place and time of our meeting or notifying our friends of our delayed arrival, thus preventing them from being upset by their own prolonged (and lonely) waiting. To put it simply, this means that cell phones now make our appointments much more "flexible"[12].

However, apart from giving us the ability to reorganize our personal appointments, cell phones have also proven to be particularly effective in coordinating *social protests and mobilizations*. This capability is particularly important to us for two reasons: firstly, because it challenges the widely held stereotype that the cell phones are primarily (if not exclusively) a means of encouraging individualism and apathy[13]. And secondly, because sociological and ethnographic research offers us a picture of their social use that once again undermines the basic premises of technological determinism: Yes, there exist *anti-hegemonic* uses of the cell phones, which come "from below" and constitute specific *politics of resistance*; yes, there are social uses of the mobile phone that facilitate agency.

11. Ling, *op.cit*., p. 58 ff.

12. Ling, *op.cit*., p. 72.

13. Usually, this stereotype is associatively followed by the stereotypical image of the hipster teenager, who is immersed in the mobile screen and has lost all contact with his environment. Cf. the aphorism of M. Hardt and A. Negri: "Sometimes one would say that we are glued to our screens and cannot take our eyes off them. How often have you seen people walking (or driving!) on city streets with their heads down, texting and bumping into each other like hypnotized people? Break the spell and discover a new way to communicate!" (M. Hardt & A. Negri, *Νὰ πάρουμε τὴ σκυτάλη: Διακήρυξη*, transl. Al. Kioupkiolis, Vivliorama Publications, Athens 2012, p. 52). We consider as highly interesting the invocation of the witchcraft in this context.

On a sample basis, one could mention the decisive contribution of cell phones in organizing and coordinating the mass demonstrations against President Joseph Estrada in the Philippines[14], the demonstrations against Prime Minister Mian Nawaz Sharif during the *Azadi March* in Pakistan[15], the anti-globalization movements in Seattle and Genoa[16], the anti-fascist demonstrations in the German city of Dresden[17], the demonstrations in the squares Tahrir[18] and Taksim[19]. We could also mention the decisive role played by mobile phones in informing and coordinating a multitude of social groups in the 2008 Athens riots[20], in the numerous "square movements" that emerged during 2010-2011[21], as well as in the more recent mobilizations of the "yellow vests" and the "nuit debout" in France.

The criticism that has been levelled at these "smart mobs", as they have come to be known, is that they dissipate with the same ease and

14. Ling, *op.cit*., p. 147. For the contribution of the cell phones to the mass mobilizations in the Philippines, see S. Rizzo, "The Promise of Cell Phones: From People Power to Technological Nanny", *Convergence* 14, 2 (2008), p. 136 ff.

15. On this, see the following excellent article: Fatima Aziz, "Performing Citizenship: Freedom March Selfies by Pakistani Instagrammers", in: A. Kuntsman (ed.), *Selfie Citizenship*, Palgrave/McMillan, Manchester 2017, pp. 21-28.

16. Ling, *op.cit*., p. 147. Cf. J. Juris, "The New Digital Media and Activist Networking within Anti-Corporate Globalization Movements", *The Annals of the American Academy*, 597, 1 (January 2005), pp. 189-208.

17. Christina Neumayer & Gitte Stald, "The Mobile Phone in Street Protest: Texting, tweeting, tracking, and tracing", *Mobile Media and Communication* 2, 2 (2014), pp. 121-133.

18. See "Role of Cell Phones in Arab Spring", https://revoevoref.wordpress.com/2016/02/29/role-of-cell-phones-in-arab-spring/ [31.09.2023].

19. D. Jones, "Turkey: Twitter and Mass Media Become Part of the Story", https://eurasianet.org/turkey-twitter-and-mass-media-become-part-of-the-story [31.09.2023].

20. See G. Pagoulatos, "Some Thoughts on the 2008 Riots in Greece", in: S. Economides & V. Monastiriotis (eds.), *The Return of Street Politics? Essays on the December Riots in Greece*, p. 46, The Hellenic Observatoty LSE, https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/24181/1/ Greek_Riots.pdf [31.09.2023].

21. See, for example, A. Monterde & J. Postill, "The Uses of Mobile Phones for Social Protest bay Spain's Indignados", https://tecnopolitica.net/sites/default/files/Monterde-Postill-mobile-ensembles.pdf. Cf. N. Symeonides, "The "Movement of the Squares" and the perspectives it creates", https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article2181 [31.09.2023].

speed with which they are created[22]. However, this liquidity does not diminish the cell phone's ability to function effectively not only on an interpersonal level but also on that of the social movements, mobilizing people who, otherwise, would remain mired in their isolation and apathy.

3.3. Interpersonal Connection

A third fundamental use of the cell phone concerns link-up, i.e. the integration of subjects into peer groups. If you use the cell phone extensively, this indicates, at least in general terms, that you are socially active and available, that you belong to one or more groups or networks, that you are popular, accepted, and desired by others. We can easily understand the importance of such awareness, especially for teenagers, if we take into account the prestige and importance that they attach to their "gang". Belonging to a "gang" is usually a vital need for its members; it provides them with: a) self-esteem, b) the opportunity for mutual disclosure and confession, c) emotional support, d) advice on everyday problems, and e) information ("gossip") about people inside and outside the group. It is also known that the "gang" has a catalytic influence on the formation of the linguistic code (slang) that its members will gradually develop, as well as their preferences on a range of issues, such as clothing, music, and relationships with the opposite sex.

However, it would have been an unacceptably unilateral approach to claim that the cell phone potential for interpersonal connection and social inclusion is exclusive to adolescents. This possibility is proving to be equally decisive for the adults, especially for those who are forced, for reasons beyond their control, to maintain "long-distance relations": couples whose cohabitation is interrupted by frequent business trips; economic migrants who "voluntarily" leave their families to seek better working conditions abroad; refugees who are persecuted by their country and try to maintain a basic contact with their relatives at home. H. Horst and D. Miller, in their excellent ethnographic study on the cell phone use in Jamaica, report that the latter proves to be a lifesaver for

22. Ling, *op.cit.*, p. 187.

family cohesion, because (a) it helps to resolve misunderstandings and maintain communication between the couple, and (b) it allows for much greater involvement of absent parents in the intellectual and emotional upbringing of their children[23]. They also point out that the cell phone helps the local economy, by making easier the transfer remittances and financial aid from abroad. It is no coincidence that the mobile phone, together with Western Union and Money Gram, has played a leading role in establishing a new type of local economy, appropriately called *the Remittance Economy*[24].

3.4 Symbolic Inclusion

Owning a mobile phone serves not only functional needs, but also deeply symbolic ones. According to H. Horst and D. Miller, it is a kind of "intelligent clothing", which does what clothing in general does: it allows us to go out into the wider public and social space, connecting us to it[25]. For his part, R. Ling underlines that in many cases the mobile phone plays for adolescents (and adults) the role of a totem: it symbolizes the user's financial and social profile[26]. On the top of that, if you in possession of the latter model of a cell phone, this is a strong indication that you are "fashionable", and reproduce its structural ambiguity: on the one hand, by declaring how technologically up-to-date and socially integrated you are; on the other hand, by affirming your specificity as a consumer (and as a personality), avoiding massification and uncritical identification with the others[27].

23. Horst & Miller, *op.cit.*, pp. 87-89.
24. For the economy of remittances in Jamaica, see Horst & Miller, *op.cit.*, pp. 114-118.
25. Horst & Miller, *op.*cit., p. 78. That the mobile is recognized by many users as a way of dressing is proven by the fact that it is often – especially for the younger generation – an extension of their right hand. From this point of view, the mobile has managed to find its place on the human body, as is the case, for example, with the wristwatch. Furthermore, according to the same authors, women, by placing the mobile between their breasts or on the back of their trousers, also make it an emblem of sexuality. In a more general sense, we would say that the mobile phone adds to the relationship between style and body (Horst & Miller, *op.cit.*, p. 63).
26. Ling, *op.cit.*, p. 184.
27. Ling, *op.cit.*, p. 108. Let us note in this regard that the gesture of fashion is always twofold: On the one hand, it creates norms, within which it homogenizes its subjects;

We've previously spoken about the cell phone's symbolic and linguistic function as a means of connecting the members of a peer group. We would now like to add that this function is particularly confirmed by the practice of texting and messaging (SMS). In most cases, users demonstrate impressive performance in this practice, because they recognize that it possesses a number of key advantages:

(a) The message produces linguistic codes, symbols, innuendos, connotations, idioms and "internal consumption" jokes, which are known to constitute the "glue" of the group members. It is cheap, discreet and quiet compared to live conversation – hence ideal for the midnight hours when the rest of the family is asleep.

(b) The message restrains the users' tendency to chatter, orienting them from the outset to state the essentials[28]. It communicates wishes, compliments, "gossip", good or bad news – all this without personal exaggeration and the interference of persons who are irrelevant to the situation (parents, relatives, neighbors, etc.)[29].

(c) You can endlessly correct, complete or revise a message before you send it. In this way, the message reduces the "spontaneity" of communication between users, but it nevertheless allows for greater clarity and precision in the expression of their thoughts and feelings.

(d) Finally, the message often acts as a salutary antidote to boredom – the scourge of all the ages, but most especially of adolescence–, enabling its users to fill the "empty" time of their daily life: when sitting on the bus or the train, standing in a waiting queue, making a transatlantic journey or suffering from fits of insomnia[30].

3.5. A Vehicle of Personal Coming of Age and Responsibility

In many cases, the mobile phone is offered to young people, with the prospect of becoming a vehicle for their personal adulthood: its use acts

on the other hand, it differentiates them through the various "looks" it creates for them. The possession of a "state-of-the-art" mobile phone obviously reproduces the above ambiguity.

28. Ling, *op.cit.*, p. 149 ff.

29. Ling, *op.cit.*, p. 152.

30. Cf. Ling, *op.cit.*, p. 51.

as a "rite of passage" to independence and responsibility. The mobile phone does indeed meet the need for the emancipation of adolescents from the close family circle, but in a mild and mutually stress-relieving way: The teenagers can, with a quiet conscience, socialize with the people they want, wander around and "let off steam" in unfamiliar neighborhoods, or even delay their return home in the evening, knowing that in case of need they can always contact their parents. On the other side, the parents give their consent to such an "emancipation", because they understand that it is under their control and always relevant: no matter how far away from home children are, the cell phone makes it possible to track their location and movements. It would therefore not be an exaggeration to claim that the cell phone weaves an (invisible) clew, ensuring that the children will return to their parents[31].

In this sense, we could relatively easily understand the reasons why the cell phone is so often claimed and demanded by teenagers with such unyielding obsession: It is the technical medium that ensures their "safe" emancipation, the tool that will allow them to "grow up", become "independent" and not totally subject to parental dictates, and the object that will enable them to no longer ask for their exit from home, but rather to announce it ("if you need anything, you can reach me on my mobile"). For exactly the same reasons, it is easy to understand why some parents try to delay the purchase of a mobile phone for their children: because they themselves are not ready to accept their emancipation or they feel that their children are still young and their emancipation can wait. In general, however, the mobile is gradually being accepted by parents as they find that their children are growing up, their conversations are becoming more and more complex, and the need to integrate themselves into peer groups becomes more urgent.

31. Cf. Ling, *op.cit.*, p. 100.

4. Everything in the Garden is Rosy?

Our approach so far, has hopefully clarified the main reasons why people own a cell phone and use it extensively. Through this device, they can more quickly and easily meet certain personal and social needs, which must be considered *fundamental*: security and safety, organization and coordination of meetings and mobilizations, interpersonal connection, symbolic inclusion, autonomy and responsibility. However, as we've tried to emphasize in the introduction to this presentation, the cell phone's "advantages" are inextricably linked to its "disadvantages" and abuses. To put it apothegmatically, we could say that *the abuses of the mobile are no more than the disadvantages inscribed in its own advantages*.

For example, we've spoken about the novel considerations of security and safety produced by the cell phone, making the latter not so much an objective reality as a subjective experience: Subjects "are not" safe, they feel likewise, knowing that if the need arises, they can contact a familiar person. But what the subjects seem to forget –in fact: they *choose* to forget– is that many times the cell phone *betrays* this feeling, not only because the person with whom we are trying to communicate may not be available at the moment we need it, but also because the technological object itself often turns out to be malfunctioning or inactive – for example, when the battery "is discharged" or when the network "is out of order". We tend to think that the cell phone indiscriminately and constantly increases the sense of security. This is simply not the case: Let's consider, for example, how dramatically the cell phone *reduces* safety in driving, how many distractions it creates, how much it slows down our reaction times, how much it dulls or inactivates our reflexes[32].

Let us refer to a second example. At the beginning of our discussion, we've talked about *remote mother-caring*, the ability of the cell phone to act as a *mechanical baby-sitter*, which provides care and advice remotely to people in need. It does not require much imagination for someone to think that, based on exactly the same capability, the cell phone can just as well function as a *mechanical terrorist*: it can be used to detonate

32. Ling, *op.cit.*, p. 49.

explosive devices, as it happened in the case of the Bali bombings in 2002[33] or the Jakarta bombings in 2009[34]. In addition to the faultless coordination of small meetings and popular mobilizations, the mobile phone can also coordinate terrorist attacks and gang hits, as well as engage in illegal conversations, collusion and networks related to arms, drugs or human trafficking[35]. While the cell phone does indeed allow us to remotely take care of others, it equally enables us to *monitor* them remotely, track their movements, tape or even blackmail them.

Finally, let us mention a third example. Although we've seen that teenagers perceive the mobile as a fundamental vehicle of symbolic inclusion and mutual connection, we must never lose sight of the *addictions* it creates, because of its specific function. The critical questions to be asked in this context are: Are adolescents' social interactions today facilitated by the cell phone or *are they totally dependent on it*? Can today's young people socialize adequately without a mobile phone? And if not, what does such a realization mean for all the "traditional" ways of socializing we have known so far? The answer to these questions becomes even more difficult if we take into account that, irrespective of the cell phone's potential socializing and behavioral functions, the evidence that it is used by young people for educational purposes is rather extremely weak[36]. The mobile phone is in no way a learning factor, and relevant studies almost unanimously blame it for the students' poor performance at school, their distraction, as well as their inability to participate in class due to lack of sleep (it has been found that adolescents use their cell phones until the morning early hours).

To the above, let us add that the high mobility on pornographic material sites is mostly found among young users – a fact that leads us to conclude that the cell phone is often the main sexual "educator" of adolescents[37].

33. Ling, *op.cit*., p. 37. Cf. "Cell Phones used to detonate Bali Bombs", https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2003/7/ 9/cell-phones-used-to-detonate-bali-bombs [last access: 31.03.2024].
34. Ling, *op.cit*., p. 37. Cf. R. Mahzam, "From Paris to Jakarta: How Terror Attacks Drive Mobile Engagement", https://www.researchgate.net/publication/319136285_From_Paris_to_Jakarta_How_Terror_Attacks_Drive_Mobile_Engagement [31.09.2023].
35. Ling, *op.cit*., p. 49. Horst & Miller, *op.cit*., p. 107 ff.
36. Horst & Miller, *op.cit*., p. 150.
37. Horst & Miller, *op.cit*., p. 73.

Finally, it is worth noting that the cell phone's possession and extensive use involves an element of delinquency in itself; it allows people of all ages to stage pranks, take photographs or make videos, with the aim of causing moral harm to third parties[38]. Anyone who maintains a basic contact with modern educational reality will be able to attest that these "negative" uses of the cell phone is not a science fiction scenario – quite the contrary, it is the harsh reality.

5. An Indicative Theological Critique of the Cell Phone

It would be extremely easy to privilege the "positive" uses of the mobile phone and exhaust our theological critique exclusively on the "negative" ones. According to our opinion, however, we consider it as of crucial importance to understand that a theological critique, which does not fall into apologetics or moralism but demands realism and analytical interest, must take into account *both* uses of the mobile. In the limited context of the present contribution, it is of course impossible to undertake the task of a *general* theological critique. What we will attempt is simply to draw the reader's attention to two basic assumptions emerging from our argumentation so far: first, the fact that, whether the cell phone is used "positively" or "negatively", it tends to create and maintain closed or self-referential networks – the so-called "*walled communities*"[39]. This means that the cell phone turns the communication process into a routine, repetitive patterns and stereotypes (clichés), encouraging people to more or less converse with the same people all the time. To formulate it more abstractly, we could say that the cell phone constantly reproduces the existing social capital, *but hardly creates a new one*; it connects people, but only those who already know each other and belong, for the most part, to *familiar* networks, communities or groups[40]. By saying this, we do not,

38. Ling, *op.cit.*, p. 119.
39. Ling, *op.cit.*, pp. 189-192.
40. As Rich Ling claims: "The cell phone does not establish new social connections; it simply reinforces or facilitates the old ones" (Ling, *op.cit.*, p. 191).

of course, mean to imply that the cell phone by definition excludes new acquaintances; rather, we wish to state that, even if these acquaintances are taking place, they are impossible to be maintained unless they are rooted in *real social life* and encapsulated in the subjects' *everyday life*. That is why we are often dissatisfied with an exchange of messages or a simple telephone conversation, preferring to meet in person the people we've got acquainted with on online. We believe that such a need is not a mere personal whim; it indicates something truly essential to human nature and *our "true" way of being*.

The second point worth focusing on is *digitalization*, the emerging tendency of users to embed most aspects of their social life in their mobile phones. Since the cell phone provides quick and easy access to the internet, it also provides quick and easy access to a series of "smart" platforms, which are self-identified as substitutes for the social spaces in which people traditionally form their social relationships. This gives rise to a large number of digital schools and universities, projects and games, excursions and educational visits, meetings and gatherings, churches and cults. One gets the impression that the mobile replaces a magic wand or a magical "Chloe's closet", through which users progressively acquire the possibility to socialize themselves in infinitely more fields than their "real" social life provides. The lure is indeed huge.

What could constitute an indicative theological response –or critique – to those two points? Regarding the first one (walled communities), it might be interesting to draw inspiration and intuitions from the Church's Trinitarian theological teaching. For example, given the fact that God does not create the world out of necessity but *out of love*, it is worth remembering that He is not content in the fullness of His inner life, nor does He blissfully rest in the inner network constituted by the mutual penetration and loving relationship of His three Persons. To daringly use the relevant terminology, we would say that the relationship of the three divine Persons does not constitute a "walled" community – it is exactly the opposite: it is dynamically flowing *outwards*, through Its uncreated actions, and creates something absolutely *different*, *other*, from it: the Cosmos, the entire created Creation. In fact, God constitutes,

sustains and opens Himself to such a degree towards otherness that He endows one of His supreme creations –man– with the freedom to question or even reject Him.

If this is the case, then we do not think it would be too much to claim that, on the basis of the Trinitarian teaching of the Church, God opposes ontological enclosure and encourages heterogeneous and unexpected social interactions: the exit to the Other. For this very reason, we believe that a theological ("trinitarian") critique of the mobile phone would welcome its function as a formation vehicle of groups, networks and communities, but would also express its radical reservation against their enclosure and retrenchment. At the same time, it would constantly point out to the users of the mobile that sociability must always be affirmed in the field of *real* social relations, because this is the only field that allows us to be enriched by the *otherness* of people and makes possible the *new*, the *unexpected* and the *extraordinary* at the relational level.

As far as the theological critique of the second point (digitization) is concerned, we believe that it should take as its starting point the moral and social implications of the Church's Christological teaching. We know that the Chalcedonian understanding of the person of Christ categorically rejects Monophysitism –the idea that the divine nature "absorbs" the human nature– and defends the distinct, immutable, indivisible and inseparable union of the two natures: a union that preserves the latter's integrity and autonomy, while at the same time implies their inter-embracing and constant enrichment. We are of the opinion that, just as the Church denounces Monophysitism in the person of Christ, in the same way it must denounce digital Monophysitism in the person of the natural, historical and social world. In other words, it should emphasize that, just as God does not desire the disappearance of human nature but its elevation and brilliancy in Christ, so too the digital world cannot (and should not) eliminate, absorb or dissolve within itself the real world; it should behave in exactly the opposite manner – contributing to its further elevation, brilliancy and affirmation. What is required, therefore, is rather a "Chalcedonian" union of the digital and real worlds, surrounding and enriching them reciprocally, while maintaining their full independence and autonomy.

What does such a "Chalcedonian" union of digital and real world mean in practice? It means that we will continue to fully use the cell phone for the purpose of satisfying a large number of our personal and social needs through it; it means that we do not revive some kind of Luddism, nor do we demonize the device by invoking the "chips" placed inside it. Still, alongside the above, we are making a radical gesture of reestablishing, defending and institutionalizing the traditional places and spaces of our socialization: the neighborhood, the school, the squares, the places of study and work, the places where we perform our secular and religious rituals. In other words, we defend the non-reducibility of all the aspects of our social world on digital mobile platforms, and we reclaim –not as individuals, but as a Church– the public space that the mobile is increasingly threatening to usurp. By turning off or "breaking" our cell phones, we are not fighting digitization; we are simply becoming technophobic. We can fight digitization only when we create adequate counterbalances to it, opposing to it with new public places and spaces for socialization, freshly plowed social soil for the contemporary people, of all ages, to step on and cultivate it.

As things stand, of course, these new places will have to wait for a long time for their architect and builder. Nevertheless, this does not in any way prevent us from hoping, dreaming – and most importantly: not searching for the solution to the problems of technology to simplistic recipes and convenient illusions.