The Social Affordances of Flashpacking:
Exploring the Mobility Nexus of Travel and Communication

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Abstract

The proliferation of digital devices and online social media and networking technologies has altered the backpacking landscape in recent years. Thanks to the ready availability of online communication, travelers are now able to stay in continuous touch with friends, family and other travelers while on the move. This article introduces the practice of 'flashpacking' to describe this emerging trend and interrogates the patterns of connection and disconnection that become possible as corporeal travel and social technologies converge. Drawing on the concepts of 'assemblages' and 'affordances', we outline several aspects of this new sociality: virtual mooring, following, collaborating, and (dis)connecting. The conclusion situates this discussion alongside broader questions about the shifting nature of social life in an increasingly

mobile and mediated world and suggests directions for future research at the intersection of tourism and technology.

Key words: independent travel, tourism mobilities, mediated travel, virtual mobilities, ethnography, online research, social interaction

Introduction

In 2004, Richards and Wilson argued that the backpacker was one of the cultural symbols of an

increasingly mobile world (2004: 3). Six years later, long-term backpacker Matt Kepnes posted

the following observations on his popular *NomadicMatt* travel blog:

> **Are we all flashpackers now?**
>
> The old way of travel – a backpack, a few bucks, and a worn guidebook is well behind us. When I first started traveling in 2006, I hardly ever saw someone with a cell phone. … Now everywhere I go, I see mobile phones, wi-fi available, netbooks, and SLR cameras. … I'm amazed at the number of people with smart phones, iPhones, and Blackberries. … In short, backpackers today are much more wired today than they used to be.
>
> The nature of backpacking has totally changed and it's not going back. This isn't a good or bad thing but just a reflection of our connected and different times. Walk into an internet café or a hostel and take a look at the computers. Everyone is on Facebook. Facebook is as ubiquitous on the road as it is back home. Additionally, I'm usually not the only one laboring over my laptop in the hostel common room.
>
> Back in the "real world," people are used to being digitally connected. We're used to having our cameras and our phones taking pictures. What used to be expensive and inconvenient on the road and, thus only available to "flashpackers", is now cheap and easy for all. … I don't see this freight train stopping anytime soon.
>
> (blog entry posted on *NomadicMatt.com*)

Matt's comments suggest that today, a cultural symbol of our increasingly mobile, mediated

and networked world must surely be the flashpacker.

In this article, we introduce the practice of flashpacking and explore its implications for

mobilizing social life among backpackers and beyond. In some ways, flashpacking may be seen

as a sub-culture of tech-savvy backpackers who are experimenting at the edge of technological

innovation. In other ways, however, flashpacking may be understood as emblematic of the

emerging forms of mobile sociality and mediated togetherness at-a-distance that characterize

contemporary life more generally. It is from both of these perspectives that we approach the

emerging trend of flashpacking and its implications for contemporary social life.

The mobile lifestyles that have now become normal for many people, especially among the

middle classes in wealthy societies, entail not just physical mobilities, but also a variety of

digital and virtual mobilities. This convergence between travel and communication constitutes a

key feature of a mobile society, as Hannam, Sheller and Urry (2006: 4) suggest:

> In addition to physical travel, both the Internet and mobile telephony are allowing new
> styles of communicating on the move … new forms of coordination of people, meetings
> and events … and a re-arrangement of the relations between domestic and public space
> … There is increasing convergence between transport and communication, 'mobilizing'
> the requirements and characteristics of co-presence into a new kind of mobility nexus.

Tourism is certainly emblematic of a new 'mobility nexus', even more so now that tourists,

travelers, and backpackers are increasingly bringing mobile devices on their journeys and

toggling back and forth between mediated and corporeal co-presence with distant social

networks. Today's travelers are not just on the road, but also – like so many people – on the

phone, online and on screen. The analysis presented here aims to address, at least in part,

Hannam, Sheller and Urry's (2006: 4) call for 'better theorization and research, especially to examine the interdependencies between changes in physical movement and in electronic communications, and especially in their increasing convergence.'

The paper is organized as follows. We begin by tracing the line from backpacking to flashpacking, highlighting in particular our understanding of flashpacking as a hybrid 'assemblage' in which material objects (such as digital devices) intersect with corporeal and virtual mobilities to enable particular choreographies of togetherness on the move. To this end, we next look to recent work on tourism performances inspired by J.J. Gibson's (1979) theory of 'affordance' to ask what kinds of sociability are made possible or precluded by flashpacking. Flashpacking takes places as much in the virtual realms of the blogosphere and the statusphere as in the physical realms of backpacker travel. These intersecting environments – online and on the road – afford new possibilities for travelers to connect to distant and nearby others, but it also shapes and constrains these interactions in particular ways. We illustrate and discuss some of these social affordances in the analytical sections that follow, focusing in particular on emerging practices of virtual mooring in the statusphere, following, collaborating, and (dis)connecting. We conclude with a tentative agenda for further research on flashpacking, one that sees the intersection between mobility and technology as fundamental to current and future traveling practices.

From Backpacking to Flashpacking

Ever since the 1970s, when the rise of 'drifter' travel (Cohen 1972, 1973) brought backpacking to the attention of the academic gaze, scholars have explored backpackers' social interactions (or lack thereof) – with local people, with other travelers, and with friends and family members back home – and the way these interactions shape travelers' itineraries and practices on the road (Teas 1988; Riley 1988; Loker-Murphy and Pearce 1995). Later ethnographies of backpackers' social interactions provided detailed accounts of an emerging 'backpacker culture' that revolved around particular social patterns on the road: temporary but intense friendships, shared conversations and stories, the display of 'road status' among long-haul travelers, and the dissemination of 'word-of-mouth' travel information (Murphy 2001; Anderskov 2002; Sørenson 2003; Noy 2007).

By the late 1990s, as Internet cafés proliferated on the backpacker circuit, scholars also began to note the effects of information and communication technologies on backpackers' sociable arrangements, not just with other travelers, but also with distant friends and family members (Sørenson 2003; Germann Molz 2004, 2006; O'Reilly 2006; O'Regan 2008). This has led to a small but growing body of scholarship that has sought to make sense of the way new social technologies – including mobile smartphones, portable computers, travel blogs, and online social networking sites –extend and revise the contours of backpacker sociality (Mascheroni 2007; White and White 2007, 2008; Hannam and Diekmann 2010; Paris 2010, 2012a, 2012b; Germann Molz 2012), a trend known as 'flashpacking'.

Flashpacking refers to two interrelated developments in backpacker travel. First, it describes a shift in the backpacker population away from twenty-something travelers getting by on shoestring budgets to older, more established and relatively affluent travelers. Hannam and Diekmann (2010: 2) explain that this shift reflects broader demographic changes 'where older age at marriage, older age having children, increased affluence and new technological developments, alongside increased holiday and leisure time have all come together.' In this sense, flashpackers have 'the means to move fluidly across the globe through various travelscapes,' but they are also able to 'connect instantly with multiple networks from virtually anywhere through an array of mobile technologies' (Paris 2012b: 191; O'Regan 2008). The second connotation of 'flashpacking' thus refers to backpackers' increasing use of new technologies and social media (Jarvis and Peel 2010). Although we focus on the new sociotechnical practices that flashpacking entails, flashpacking should be viewed as a continuation of traditional practices of backpacking, and indeed we use these terms interchangeably throughout the paper.

As backpackers integrate mobile technologies into their everyday practices and extend backpacking culture into virtual realms, they reproduce many of the sociabilities that scholars have previously identified; however, these sociabilities are also reconfigured in important ways as they intersect and reassemble with new technologies. We can thus think of flashpacking as a complex 'assemblage' of bodies, mobilities, portable technologies, concrete infrastructures, networked spaces and virtual places in which the social and the technological are mutually determined (Latour 2005; Larsen 2008). As we discuss in the next section, we can identify new

performances of sociability on-the-move and at-a-distance that are made possible – or

'afforded' – by the hybrid assemblage of flashpacking.

Affordances

In describing the mechanisms through which bodies, places, technologies and performances are

co-produced in the context of tourism, several scholars have turned to J.J. Gibson's (1979)

notion of *affordances* (Edensor 2006; Larsen 2008; Haldrup & Larsen 2010). For Gibson,

affordance refers to the ways in which the material qualities of a particular environment enable

or preclude certain embodied performances in that place. Gibson (1979: 129) writes: 'The

affordances of the environment … are what it *offers* to the animal, what it *provides or furnishes*

either for good or ill.' Such affordances are relational. The contours, obstacles, paths and

textures of places, in relation with the physical capacities of the body, afford certain

performances, while resisting or disabling other performances.

Gibson's notion of affordances has significant implications for tourism studies, where it has

offered theorists new ways of thinking about the material and multisensory dimensions of

tourist performances. As a result, Edensor (2006: 30) argues that:

> It is therefore essential to reinstate the *affordances* of place and space, those qualities
> which are spatial potentialities, constraining and enabling a range of actions. … The
> surfaces, textures, temperatures, atmospheres, smells, sounds, contours, gradients, and
> pathways of places encourage humans – given the limitations and advantages of their
> normative physical abilities – to follow particular courses of action, producing an
> everyday practical orientation dependent upon a multisensory apprehension of place
> and space.

Other tourism scholars have similarly observed the way tourism places afford or constrain particular performances by visitors. Baerenholdt, *et al*. (2004) describe the way the beach, with its hybrid mix of wet and dry sand, stones and sticks, and familial assemblages of eager children and indulgent parents, affords seaside performances of sand-castle building. Rantala (2010) explains how the forest, with its tracks, campfire locations, changing weather conditions and places for breaks, affords particular performances of hiking and guiding. Similarly, Waitt and Duffy (2010) describe the listening performances afforded by the material and sonic environments of music festivals. Of course, not all places afford the same performances for different bodies. As Veijola and Valtonen (2007) point out, for example, airplane seats afford different comforts and accommodations for bodies of different heights, weights and genders. These scholars have effectively used the concept of affordance to reconceptualize tourist places and performances as fluid, relational and connected rather than as pre-formed containers of tourist activity.

While the notion of affordance has primarily been used to highlight a realm of physical possibilities for embodied action, we wish to focus instead on the *social* affordances of flashpacking. On this count, we have found Larsen's (2008) analysis of digital tourism photography particularly instructive. In his ethnographic account of digital tourist photography, Larsen notes that digital cameras entail new technical capacities and are embedded in complex interactive systems that enable tourists to make and share photographs in new ways. For example, Larsen describes how the delete function allows for more 'casual and "experimental"

ways of photographing' (2008: 148). Similarly, the display screen, which allows both

photographers and their subjects to monitor the screen and immediately evaluate the outcome

of the shot, '"affords" new sociablities for producing and consuming photographs'

collaboratively (2008: 148). Furthermore, an extensive network of computers, editing software,

online photo sharing websites and mobile connectivity with camera-enabled phones, extends

the social affordances of digital photography beyond the photographic moment itself, enabling

photographers to share their images with both proximate and distant others.

In revealing the complex intersections between digital photography technologies and social

practices, Larsen's analysis suggests that, in addition to their physical and perceived

affordances, we might also think about new technologies in terms of their *social* affordances.

We propose that technological systems and devices (including digital cameras, mobile phones,

portable computers and online social networking sites), combine and assemble with the

corporeal mobility of backpacking, to afford certain forms of sociability between flashpackers

and their distant friends and families, fellow travelers and, in some cases, nearby others. In the

sections below, we draw on evidence from our own studies of flashpackers to illustrate these

affordances. First, however, we outline our methodological approaches, which are similarly

intertwined with the possibilities offered by new technologies.

Methodology

The findings presented in this paper are based on research material from two recent projects

on practices of interactive travel and the virtualization of backpacker culture. Although these

projects were conducted separately, they both explored emerging sociotechnical practices of flashpacking in online social media, such as blogging and YouTube, and in social networking sites, such as CouchSurfing, Facebook and Twitter. Because flashpacking is not only a mobile practice, but also a hybrid one, it requires an ethnographic approach that straddles multiple physical, virtual, and mediated realms. Our studies were therefore based on a mixed-method and multi-sited approach that we refer to as 'mobile virtual ethnography'.

The term 'mobile virtual ethnography' reflects our attempts to adapt ethnographic techniques to the study of the mobile and virtual social phenomena of flashpacking. Ethnography has been an appealing methodological choice for research on backpacker mobilities and cultures because its emphasis on sustained presence in communities of practices has allowed researchers to interact closely with travelers (see Anderskov 2002; Sørenson 2003). However, traditional ethnography, requiring place-based immersion and going 'into the field', has also proved difficult to apply to backpackers, who by definition 'constitute an un-territorialized community characterized by impromptu social interactions' (Mascheroni 2007: 529).

In conducting our respective mobile virtual ethnographies, we challenged these conventional tenets of ethnography by rethinking the research field and what it meant to go 'into the field.' A mobile virtual ethnographic approach imagines the field as a fluid and multi-sited terrain of interaction (Clifford 1997; Marcus 1998). It is sited not just across multiple physical places, such as backpackers' various destinations, but also across multiple virtual locations, such as blogs, social networking sites, and other locales of mediated interaction, which required us to move

with our respondents across both physical and virtual spaces. This included immersing ourselves in the 'blogosphere' and the 'statusphere', interactive online realms composed of continuous status updates in social networking sites and on travel blogs. We spent much of our time 'hanging out' online (Kendall 2002) and following along as our respondents traversed these hybrid spaces, tweeted updates, posted digital photographs and videos online, published blog entries, linked to other flashpackers' social networking profiles, mapped their location on Google Earth, commented on other travel blogs or responded to comments on their own blogs.

Furthermore, because these mediated forms of co-presence can be extended across time and space, they enabled a sustained interaction with backpackers over relatively long periods of time. Whereas Sørensen (2003) and O'Reilly (2006) found it difficult to maintain ongoing interaction with an ever-shifting community of travelers, the flashpackers we studied maintained their presence in the virtual spaces of blogs, email and online networking sites, making it possible for us to prolong our interaction with them virtually, if not physically.

In addition to keeping extensive field notes, we compiled databases of travelers' online blog and status postings and conducted in-depth interviews with flashpackers. In both studies, a virtual snowballing technique was used to build the research samples from which this data was drawn. In one case, virtual snowballing (following links between travel blogs) resulted in a sample of forty blogs, representing a total of 74 travelers with an average age of 29. Five of these blogs are cited in the analysis below (see Table 1). The database drawn from engaging intensively with these blogs over an eight-month period included the first-hand accounts,

photographs, maps, and videos that travelers regularly published online, as well as comments left by friends, family members and other followers. In addition to hanging out and following travelers on their blogs, in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted via email and telephone with nine of the flashpackers. The sample was evenly split in terms of gender, but consisted overwhelmingly of white, middle-class, Anglophone, college-educated travelers primarily from North America or Europe.

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

In the second project, a sample of fifteen travelers was compiled, again using a snowballing technique, and narrowed down to eleven backpackers who actively maintained at least three of the following online activities: a blog, a Facebook profile, a Twitter feed or a YouTube account. Of these, eight flashpackers agreed to participate in the study, which involved an 'overt lurking' approach. With the respondents' consent, the researcher visited and analyzed their social media sites, mapping their social movements via linkages across various sites such as blogs, Twitter, YouTube and Flickr. Although 'lurking' seems like a passive position, it is in fact categorized as an active role in social media consumption (Bernoff, et al. 2007). The flashpackers who agreed to be followed also participated in semi-structured interviews, conducted via Skype and email. As with the first project, the flashpackers in this sample were primarily from North America and Europe, except for one Brazilian and one Australian. The flashpackers, including five males and three females, ranged in age from 23-45. Two of them

earned money as bloggers or free-lance writers while traveling, two were recent university

graduates, and two were employed in the IT industry.

The sample of flashpackers analyzed here may be small, but it is representative of backpacker

demographics noted elsewhere (Sørensen 2003; O'Reilly 2006) and in more recent research on

flashpackers (Mascheroni 2007; White & White 2007). These studies find that, while

backpackers are certainly not a homogeneous group, they do share certain features. For

example, the interactive travelers interviewed for Mascheroni's (2007) study of network

sociality ranged in age from 25-33, had high levels of educational attainment (with many

employed as software programmers, webmasters and online journalists) and were evenly split

between men and women. The tilt toward North American and European respondents in our

respective samples aligns quite closely with other studies, where the backpackers also tend to

be Western European or North American and 'primarily, though not exclusively, white and

middle class' (O'Reilly 2006: 1001; see Table 2).

[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]

Our analytical approach was qualitative and inductive, concerned with understanding the

texture and quality of the sociabilities that our respondents were performing in the 'mobility

nexus'. The findings discussed in the sections below are illustrated primarily by material

generated through the ethnographic engagement and in-depth interviews described above. In

the case of interviews, travelers' names have been changed to protect respondents' anonymity.

In the extracts from online travel blogs, which are made accessible to the public by the travelers themselves, names have not been changed.

The Social Affordances of Flashpacking

In the sections that follow, we examine some of the forms of co-presence, togetherness and sociability that emerged in our respective studies. The themes we explore here are by no means intended as an exhaustive or fixed account of the mobile sociabilities that flashpacking affords. Keeping in mind that technological practices, within and beyond the context of travel and tourism, remain open to interpretation and innovation, we describe in the sections below what we see as four key social affordances of flashpacking: virtual mooring in the statusphere; following; collaborating; and (dis)connecting.

Virtual mooring in the statusphere

While corporeal mobilities and physical places are still just as important to the flashpacking experience, new virtual realms have developed that allow travelers to be fully integrated in their multiple networks and maintain a sustained state of co-presence between the backpacker culture and their home culture. As new technologies reconfigure the spatial and temporal parameters of social life, we can no longer say that being together is the opposite of being apart, or that being away necessarily means that one is absent. New forms of mobile and mediated co-presence have become possible, from 'absent presence' (Gergen 2002) to 'virtual proximity' (Bauman 2003) and 'digital elasticity' (Pearce and Gretzel 2012). For example, thanks to the digital immediacy of camera phones and the Internet, travelers can maintain a constant

sense of co-presence with a dispersed social network. Snapshots and travel stories that would have been shared after the journey can now be shared in interactive formats *while* the traveler is experiencing them. Travel mottos like 'I was here!' or 'Wish you were here!' seem obsolete in an age of 'I am here right now and you are (virtually) here with me!' (see Bell & Lyall 2005: 136). These immediate and ongoing sociabilities are enabled by a new terrain of interactivity as flashpackers are able to stay connected in the realm of the 'statusphere'.

The statusphere, defined as 'the state of publishing, reading, responding to, and sharing micro-sized updates' (Solis 2009), is dominated by online social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter and social media platforms such as blogs. It provides flashpackers with a kind of 'virtual mooring' (see Hannam, Sheller & Urry 2006) that keeps them connected to their communities while they are on the move. Even as their physical location is constantly changing, travelers can establish a relatively stable 'homepage away from home' on Facebook and Twitter or by publishing a blog (Germann Molz 2008: 330). This virtual mooring in the statusphere becomes the crucial foundation for the kinds of social relations flashpackers are able to maintain as they travel around the world.

In order to understand the contours of these emerging forms of mobile sociality, it is important to recognize how the statusphere affords certain kinds of mediated interactions, including the forms of following, collaborating and (dis)connecting that we suggest are central to flashpackers' mobile sociality. For one thing, the statusphere is comprised of a series of constant status updates and reply comments that travelers and their friends post on social

networking sites or blogs. As we will see, the ongoing-ness and interactivity that characterizes

the statusphere lends a sense of 'following' and 'being followed' to flashpackers' online social

relations.

Second, the statusphere has changed the way online interactions and conversations take place.

Instead of being focused on the host site, they occur through syndication. Content is now

spread and curated by peers through the statusphere. Individuals are empowered in the

dissemination of information and the evolution of connectivity through social networking tools

like Twitter's RT (the ability to 're-tweet' a posting) and Facebook's 'likes' and comments.

These mechanisms have a social effect, as Solis (2009) argues:

> One blog post can spark a distributed response in the respective communities where
> someone chooses to RT, favorite, like, comment, or share. These byte-sized actions
> reverberate throughout the social graph, resulting in a formidable network effect of
> measurable movement and activity. It is this form of digital curation of relevant
> information that binds us contextually and sets the stage to introduce not only new
> content to new people, but also facilitates the forging of new friendships, or at least
> connections, with the publisher in the process.

The syndicated character of the statusphere is closely related to emerging forms of online

collaboration around which backpacker culture now coalesces. The statusphere is both the

condition for and the effect of this active collaborative work by flashpackers who produce,

publish, curate and disseminate content.

This content creates a hybridization between the 'road culture' and the virtual culture of backpackers by mediating physical experiences and spaces in the statusphere. Chris, a flashpacker who maintains a digital travel publishing business, provided an example of this hybridization, and the speed with which his experiences spread through the statusphere of backpacking:

> We published our podcast on our first thoughts on traveling in Chile on our website. Following that, we broadcast the link on Twitter, and it was re-tweeted several times. We also posted it on Facebook (the public fan page and personal profiles) and had several comments regarding what we talked about. We also posted the page on StumbleUpon, which allowed it to be shared with dozens of other people.
>
> (Chris, interview transcript)

This example illustrates the role that flashpackers play as creators, mediators, and sharers within the hybrid physical-virtual spaces that have emerged.

Third, the statusphere becomes a site of virtual mooring, not just for individual backpackers but for a backpacking community. These virtualized cultural spaces of backpacking provide a hybrid space for cultural norms and community values to be experienced without the need of corporeal travel. Previously, backpacking culture could only be experienced in the close physical proximity to other travelers on the backpacking trail. Now, individuals can remain virtually moored not only to their social networks while they are traveling, as noted in Alan's observation that technological development 'further empowers backpackers, and encourages backpackers to develop an extensive social network of friends and contacts which offer constant insights into different cultures and peoples' (Alan, interview transcript). In the

statusphere, backpackers are able to stay in almost constant touch with friends and family

members, regardless of temporal or physical distance, they are able to create new connections

with the backpacker community both on and off the road, even once they return home.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that while the statusphere offers flashpackers a sense of 'virtual

mooring', the statusphere itself relies on a material infrastructure of coaxial cable systems, cell

towers, servers and hardware. These physical moorings shape the affordances of the

statusphere in important ways. As we will see, flashpackers' itineraries often take them to

places where unreliable electricity and Internet access may temporarily suspend their virtual

journeys, even as their corporeal journeys continue, leading to complex negotiations of ongoing

sociabilities. The hybrid spaces and virtual moorings of the statusphere, underpinned by an

extensive if uneven physical infrastructure of communications, afford a range of social

interactions that would have been difficult, if not impossible, for backpackers to maintain

before.

Following

In the statusphere, where a steady stream of up-to-the-moment postings lends itself to

continuous updating and monitoring, sociality often takes the form of 'following.' Indeed,

following has now become a common term for describing how people interact with one

another in social media spaces. Facebook users are encouraged to 'follow' each other's

updates; Twitter subscribers are referred to as 'followers'; and flashpackers explicitly invite

their friends and family members to 'follow' them as they travel around the world. A case in

point is a travel blog titled *Follow Our Footsteps*, published by Greg and Ashley, couple in their

twenties who traveled around the world from 2009 to 2010. In the introduction to the blog,

Greg and Ashley write: 'We will post often to keep you updated on our whereabouts and what

we have been doing. So please follow!' On this and other blogs, readers' comments, such as the

ones below, also appeal to the notion of 'following' to describe ways of relating with the

travelers:

> That was some of the most inspiring cinematography, beautiful music and footage. Man
> I love you guys, and following along with you guys. Beau your facial hair is looking extra
> crazy "bushy" you look like your [sic] having a blast. Can't wait to hear from you soon!
> (reader comment, *TheWorldEffect.com*)

> Hey Guys! […] Wanted to follow you two around the world … have to live vicariously
> through someone ;). Looks [like] you are having the time of your life.
> (reader comment, *IShouldLogOff.com*)

In these comments, following is aligned with several social possibilities: a sense of anticipation

for the next update, an ability to keep tabs on the traveler's physical and emotional state, and a

source of inspiration and vicarious fulfillment.

There are several features of status updates and travel blogs that shape these sociabilities in

particular ways. To begin with, the reverse chronology of travel blogs gives them a serial nature

that produces a sense of immediacy and draws readers actively into the storyline (Dann and

Parinnello 2007). For example, in response to a posting about trekking the Inca Trail in Peru,

one of the readers of *Follow Our Footsteps* posted this plea: 'I want to know what happens next

and I don't like waiting … Did Greg make it to Machu Picchu? … Did Ashley get better? Stay

tuned tomorrow???????'

By capturing a 'tight union between everyday experience and the record of that experience' as

it happens (Hookway 2008: 94), the travel blog is an ongoing drama of social interaction.

Following creates a sense of day-to-day intimacy as readers keep up with mundane details of

the traveler's journey, such as growing facial hair or coming down with a stomach bug.

However, in order to be a part of the traveler's journey as it unfolds, readers must follow the

blog on a continuous basis. This prompts a kind of serialized exchange of short status updates

and replies that carry on continuously throughout the duration of the journey. As Crawford

(2009: 526) explains, these brief but constant updates become a 'continuous background

presence' of 'ongoing yet diffuse engagement' through which individuals are able to monitor

one another online.

The fact that monitoring can be understood as a form of togetherness suggests that mediated

social relations involve a kind of interpersonal surveillance. This may help to explain how

'following' has become so easily naturalized into the language of flashpacking and why many

travelers invite their friends and family members to 'watch' and 'follow' them online (Germann

Molz 2006). In social media spaces like Facebook and Twitter, following contributes to a sense

of 'ambient intimacy' by providing 'access to the details of someone's everyday life, as prosaic

as they often are' (Crawford 2009: 527). Blog and status updates are not just for reporting on

extraordinary sights or events, but also mundane experiences. In turn, comments posted in

response to these everyday realities become evidence of caring about and paying attention to a distant friend.

This interpersonal surveillance can promote a sense of shared intimacy (Qian & Scott 2007; Hadley & Caines 2009), but the opposite may also be true. As one blogger lamented, 'My biggest frustration … is when a friend emails me and says "where are you?" or sends me a link to something … when I've already written about it myself. … [I]t is hurtful in how much effort it take to put ourselves out there only to be ignored by those that supposedly care about us' (Kimberly, interview transcript). From this perspective, following also entails obligation (Crawford 2009: 527). As Crawford (2009: 528) observes, the 'intimacy of social media contexts is not always pleasant or positive; it can generate discomfort, confusion and claustrophobia'. Travelers must therefore negotiate not only new ways of being close and intimate with their distant social relations, but also reasserting a sense of distance.

In the context of travel blogs, then, following is not just instrumental, but affective. It allows the traveler's social network – including strangers – to connect with them emotionally, to exert a sense of control, to care about them at a distance or to vicariously travel with them. According to one long-time travel blogger, 'Following people is about living their journey with them and experiencing the places they do through their stories' (Nathan, interview transcript). In this particular case, Nathan is referring not only to the readers who follow his blog, but to the dozens of other round-the-world travel blogs that he follows on a regular basis. As we discuss in

the next section, flashpacking often involves extensive levels of online interaction and

collaboration among a mobile community of backpackers.

Collaborating

In addition to connecting travelers to friends and family back home in new ways, the social

technologies favored by flashpackers open up new possibilities for travelers to interact with

other travelers on the road. In many ways, flashpacking extends the intensive communication

networks that have long been a defining feature of backpacker culture (Noy 2007), often

serving to socialize travelers into the backpacking culture. As Cohen (1973: 96) observed in his

early study of 'drifters', 'information flows by word-of-mouth from the experienced travelers to

the newcomer.' And in her influential research on backpacker culture, Riley (1988: 322-323)

finds that:

> Communication networks are a salient feature of budget travel … budget travelers quickly
> establish friendships and are continually discussing the "best" places to visit … a great deal
> of information is passed on via word-of-mouth and many of the latest "in" spots are only
> communicated in this way.

Over the past few decades, tourism researchers have formulated ever more nuanced accounts

of how ad-hoc backpacker communities coalesce, at least intermittently, around the face-to-

face exchange of travel stories and advice. These studies have noted that backpackers tend to

meet by chance, spend a brief but intense time together during which they share word-of-

mouth travel information, and then disperse to travel along their separate itineraries (Loker-

Murphy & Pearce 1995; Murphy 2001; Sørenson 2003).

More recently, researchers have observed that social networking technologies offer new mediums for the exchange of such travel information, and at the same time reshape the way backpacker communities assemble on- and offline (Olson 2008; Hofstaetter & Egger 2009). Word-of-mouth has always been an important, informal way of exchanging and corroborating knowledge among travelers, but developments of social media and mobile technologies have reconfigured how experiences are shared and how communication occurs.

For one thing, as 'word-of-mouth' communication moves online, it becomes more decentralized and democratized, in contrast to the more hierarchical structure of conventional backpacker road culture that often relied on guide books like *Lonely Planet* (Anderskov 2002). In addition to decentralizing traveler communication networks, 'e-word-of-mouth' (Litvin, Goldsmith and Pan 2007) speeds up and spreads out the dissemination of travel information. In the past, the backpacking road culture changed very little over many decades as a result of limited time that backpackers would spend in the physical spaces of backpacking, and the lack of access to the 'road culture' from home (Sørenson 2003; Anderskov 2002). The rate of change and adaption could be argued to be much greater now because of the virtual nature of the backpacking culture. An example given by Chris illustrates this. He creates, uploads, promotes through Facebook and Twitter, and sells podcasts (serialized audio-video episodes that his followers subscribe to or stream online) online based on his current experiences backpacking. Usually within a week he has a 1000 page views on his blog, 2000 downloads of the podcast, and several comments about the content from other backpackers. The virality of backpacker

knowledge creates an environment in which knowledge can be experienced, created, shared,

contested, reconstructed, and authorized in an extremely short amount of time.

The content of the information around which travelers collaborate also shifts as more and more

backpackers travel with technology. Travelers now advise one another not just on where to go

or what to do on the journey, but also on the mechanics of being a flashpacker. For example,

travel bloggers will often post detailed accounts of the digital equipment they have chosen to

pack or how certain devices hold up under the rigors of travel. The statusphere is filled with

such exchanges: discussions about the best digital camera, debates over whether a netbook or

tablet computer is the best choice, or questions about how to activate an international roaming

plan for a smartphone.

The kind of online presence and interaction made possible through blogs and other social

media helps to establish a group awareness among the travel community, as can be seen in the

following blog posting by travelers Danny and Jillian:

> Each blogger we meet or chat with puts us in touch with more travelers. There's a core
> group of people that we email and 'chat' with regularly and they have become like
> travel buddies to us. … It helps to have someone to commiserate with or touch base
> with, exchanging advice, travel anecdotes and even recommendations. We might never
> meet them … but its [sic] nice to know that they're there, just an email away whenever
> you need a reminder that you aren't alone.
>
> (blog entry posted on *IShouldLogOff.com*)

According to this post, social media technologies are a key tool for feeling a sense of co-presence, whether physical or mediated, with other flashpackers. This togetherness is also enabled by the forms of 'virtual mooring' and 'following' discussed earlier, which make travelers available to one another online. Thanks to these mechanisms, the accidental and brief friendships that have long characterized backpacker's social relations (Riley 1988) can now be intentional and ongoing, prolonged through email and the use of online social networking sites.

While flashpacking affords a sense of cohesion and community in some cases, the ability to stay in touch may, in other cases, make it harder for travelers to leave behind friendships that should have remained temporary or to avoid connecting with people they do not want to meet. For example, flashpackers describe ignoring emails from travelers they do not wish to correspond with and one female flashpacker, Catherine, admitted that she avoided meeting up in person with a male traveler who had left inappropriate comments on her blog. Indeed, Catherine's experience remind us that travel has always been a deeply gendered practice, and flashpacking is no different. In some ways, flashpacking affords new possibilities for female travelers, especially those wishing to travel alone, by offering a sense of security and community. At the same time, however, we see that because the risks of travel are unevenly distributed across gender, female flashpackers may need to invent new tactics for avoiding dangerous or unwanted connections. New mediums for communicating, prolonging relationships, or establishing a sense of community make it easier for travelers to meet like-minded wanderers, but also require new strategies for re-establishing a sense of anonymity and distance when those relationships threaten, fade or misfire.

(Dis)connecting

So far, we have described the way social media and networking technologies enable backpackers to connect and collaborate on the move, but these technologies also afford new forms of *dis*connection. This may take the form of unwanted disconnections from local environments, unexpected disconnections due to power outages or lack of Internet access, or deliberate disconnections intended to manage the constant availability of flashpacking.

For the most part, flashpackers describe the new possibilities for connecting and collaborating on the move in positive terms. Being able to stay in touch throughout the journey can help ease homesickness, bring peace of mind to worried parents, and provide backpackers with an ever-ready source of information and support. However, they also acknowledge – and often debate – the extent to which staying in touch with 'home' disconnects travelers from the local place or from the backpacking experience. As Gasser and Simun (2010) suggest in their discussion of the travel experiences of 'digital natives', while these individuals are physically traveling, they are mentally and emotionally at home. For example, one interviewee, Brandon, reflects that 'being TOO connected to home dissipates your focus …. And really takes away from the place you are exploring. How can you really enjoy what's going on in a local village if your mind is thinking about gossip and updates from home that come straight to your phone?' (Brandon, interview transcript).

Many travelers echo Brandon's concern that staying connected with distant friends involves *dis*connecting from localized experiences. In their blog *The World Effect*, Meggan and Beau describe how their digital photography practices both enabled and constrained their connections with the local environment. On the one hand, they used their digital cameras to communicate with people they met locally (for example, by taking pictures of children and then showing them the photos in the camera's display), but they also occasionally shut themselves away in their hostel or in an Internet café for hours on end to write, edit and publish their blog. In one instance, when they visited a gorilla refuge in Rwanda, Beau and Meggan described being focused more on shooting photos and video for the blog than on paying attention to the gorillas. They eventually put their cameras away so they could 'just [take] it all in and really experience the situation.'

The same technologies that connect flashpackers to a mobile community of other travelers can also have the effect of isolating travelers from one another. Brandon recalled a recent hostel experience:

> I've sat in hostel common rooms where 10 backpackers were silently staring at screens gathering information about the city they are in on Twitter rather than talking to each other, meeting new friends, and sharing information through the 'traveler network' that is right in the room. I can't count the times that I have sat next to a stranger on a bus that I would have spoken to and interacted with had they not spent the entire journey playing with iPhone apps.
>
> (Brandon, interview transcript)

In these examples, travelers describe the unwanted local disconnections afforded by communication and information technologies. In other cases, they describe another kind of disconnection: unexpected disruptions to Internet access.

Unlike the early days of flashpacking, when the ability to connect to the Internet from remote spots was a noteworthy feat, today's flashpackers find the *lack* of access more remarkable than its availability. For example, Amanda, one of the authors of the blog *The Lost Girls*, posted a story about arriving in Burma only to find that they had no access to email or the Internet:

> Incredulity gave way to utter disbelief. Myanmar had to have internet. Every country in the world did. To me, saying that a place didn't have internet was like saying that it didn't have air to breathe or water to drink. How could locals survive without Gmail? Yahoo? Skype?!? … [T]his was my opportunity to accomplish the very thing I'd set out to do eight months ago… Unplug. Disconnect. Log OFF. For the first time on our entire trip, [We] would have no cell phones and no computers and no communications devices. We'd be forced to just hang out, absorb some culture and not check in with anyone for an entire week and a half. 10 days. 240 hours. 14,400 minutes.

(blog entry posted on *LostGirlsWorld.blogspot.com*)

Amanda's comments illustrate the way flashpackers see constant Internet access as an obstacle to 'real' connections. At the same time, however, Amanda's 'utter disbelief' belies the extent to which flashpackers take connectivity for granted; it is as vital as air or water. Many flashpackers describe their reliance on access to the statusphere in similarly embodied terms. In their analysis of tourism in technology dead zones, Pearce and Gretzel observe that 'the experience of being unplugged involves several strong sensory elements of more precisely the absence of highly familiar sensory inputs' (2012: 39). Alan echoes this finding when he reflects on what it feels like to not be able to connect: 'While not as extreme, it feels like losing one of my senses.

As though I've lost the ability to feel with one hand, see out of one eye, or hear from one ear'
(Alan, interview transcript).

Flashpackers are not the only ones who become habituated to constant access. Parents and
friends following along from a distance also come to expect regular updates, which can have
the paradoxical effect of causing (rather than alleviating) worry when travelers go quiet. In
response, flashpackers have developed several strategies for managing these expectations. For
example, Alan explains that 'with friends/family I know that they can become very worried.
They are used to and accustomed to fairly regular contact with me. When I go dark, especially
unexpectedly, while traveling it can be very unsettling for them.' In order to mitigate this
anxiety, Alan takes special preparations: 'I was in rural Zambia on Safari which meant we were
deep in the bush and lacked internet. I suspected we wouldn't have internet going into the
safaris, so I made sure to notify everyone that I was going off the grid for a few days' (Alan,
interview transcript). Although flashpackers often describe going to great pains to forewarn
their friends, families, and especially their parents, before traveling into dead zones, sometimes
travelers use these technologies to strategically distance themselves from their online audience
or social network. For example, although many travel bloggers use geotagging features that
automatically link their photos to an online map or update their location when they log on to
their blog or Facebook, and GPS devices and smart phone apps that transmit their location to a
specified group of people, they also described the strategies they used to manage this kind of
surveillance. Some travelers edit identifying information on their blogs or deliberately delay

posting blog entries so that the online audience never knows precisely where they are. This enables travelers to control who is able to follow them, and just how closely.

Travelers also use different social media spaces and different devices to negotiate varied levels of intimacy and access. Many of the flashpackers we interviewed described shifting their intimate relationships onto Facebook or email, where they had more control over who could access their status updates, while using the more accessible realms of Twitter or their travel blogs for public social interactions. For others, the choice of which devices to use (or not use) also indicated a certain level of control over connection and disconnection. For example, Don carries several technological devices in order to maintain connections with home, with his virtual community, and to document his experiences to share virtually. Despite this, Don said that he 'purposefully did not bring a cell phone with me on my trip, as a way to stay somewhat disconnected' (Don, interview transcript). Alan similarly explained, 'I typically check in (depending on how wired my destination country is) between 3-6 times a week via email, Facebook and Twitter. I do not, however, take a cell phone with me … I enjoy my lack of phone/limited connectivity on the road' (Alan, interview transcript). According to these flashpackers, using a netbook or laptop to connect and interact with a virtual network through social media appears not to be defined as 'being connected', unlike a mobile phone, which connotes less control over one's accessibility. In other words, flashpacking entails making choices about which devices to use, whom travelers will stay in contact with, when they will make contact, and how they will stay in contact.

Conclusion

There is a sense among many of the travelers we followed and interviewed that flashpacking is becoming the 'new normal'. For example, comparing a backpacking trip he had taken around Europe in 1998 to his current journey, Don observed:

> There was no Facebook—you lived in the moment, sent postcards to people at home. Now social media, blogs, and quality internet connections around the world make it incredibly easy to update people on your travels and experiences. Plenty of backpackers do not keep blogs, but simply post updates and photos to Facebook from time to time. It's the norm.
>
> (Don, interview transcript)

This comment reveals the assumption that new technologies have become an ordinary aspect of most travelers' journeys. Logging onto Facebook, emailing home, uploading photos, or texting friends are now routine aspects of a mobile lifestyle. This returns us to the question from Matt's blog that we posed in the introduction: 'Are we all flashpackers now?' For Matt to ask this question suggests that this trend extends beyond a mere subculture of backpacking and reflects, instead, the way travelers and tourists now interact on the road and how they stay in touch with a mobile and dispersed community of friends, family and fellow travelers. Indeed, the answer to Matt's question is less about the statistical significance of a trend than it is about the new patterns of sociality that emerge when movement, communication and technology converge.

In his posting, Matt observes: 'Back in the "real world," people are used to being digitally connected.' The notion that flashpacking reflects a more general 'technologization' of everyday life suggests that flashpacking is neither an anomaly nor an escape, but rather an emblem of broader shifts in the way we 'do' sociality in contemporary, mobile societies. Flashpacking reflects the 'mobility nexus' of travel and communication that now arranges and anchors contemporary social life. Through the practice of flashpacking, we can begin to see how individuals create and navigate new configurations of togetherness, intimacy, distance, connection and movement as they perform their social relations on the road, on the phone, online and on screen. As individuals move together and apart, they shift their social interactions at least partly into the virtual realm of the statusphere, where concise but constant updates keep them 'moored' to a dispersed social network. Flashpackers embody Bauman's paradox of modern sociality: 'Distance is no obstacle to getting in touch, but getting in touch is no obstacle to staying apart' (2003: 62). What it means to be in touch or to stay apart takes on new means and new meanings. Social media and networking technologies afford different ways of being together, as we have seen in the way individuals follow, collaborate and connect with one another while on the move or far apart. However, these technologies also create new desires for distance and afford new ways of disconnecting.

Our objective in this paper was to detail some of the social affordances of flashpacking, such as virtual mooring, following, collaborating and (dis)connecting, a discussion that merely scratches the surface of the new arrangements of mobile sociality that emerge at the intersection between tourism and technology. Even within the narrow scope we have explored here, much

remains to be developed and studied. For example, our discussion touched only briefly on the gendered nature of flashpacking, but suggests that a more systematic analysis of gender is required to understand how the social affordances of flashpacking are realized and performed differently by men and women. On a different note, more research is also needed on the way physical moorings of flashpacking and uneven access in 'technology dead zones' (Pearce and Gretzel 2012) shape the affordances we have described.

In our analysis, we have shown how flashpacking collapses clear distinctions between home and away, especially while travelers are on the road, but what happens when flashpackers stop traveling? Studies have shown that the 'real time' sharing of experiences 'often replaces face-to-face narrative once back home' (Mascheroni 2007: 538). This instant mediation merits more attention in future studies, as it has in the reconstruction of experiences through social media after returning home (Xiang and Gretzel 2009; Pudliner 2007). There are two related points worthy of additional research. First is the question of how travelers might use online social networking technologies to extend their traveling selves and communities back into their everyday lives. The second is the fact that, for many flashpackers, technology defers homecoming altogether, enabling them to prolong their mobile lifestyles by turning their travel blogs or networking practices into lucrative online businesses.

In addition to examining the blurring between home and away, further examination is needed to understand how travelers negotiate shifting registers of privacy and anonymity under the conditions of flashpacking. Flashpackers forego their anonymity online in order to be 'followed'

on their blogs, Twitter or Facebook by friends and family members. Similarly, the ability to

maintain connections with other travelers they meet on the road makes it more difficult for

flashpackers to retain a sense of anonymity on the backpacker trail. Flashpacking thus offers a

unique perspective on persistent questions about privacy and surveillance online. Perhaps most

intriguing are the various strategies flashpackers devise to elude their social networks, a few of

which we have mentioned here. It is in these efforts to avoid, control and manage just how

accessible they are and to whom that we see flashpackers resisting the teleology of

technologically mediated togetherness. Further research would help reveal the nuanced ways

in which flashpackers are integrating these technologies into their mobility practices.

By engaging the concept of 'affordances', we have tried to draw attention to the way these

possibilities for togetherness are shaped, but not determined, by the technologies flashpackers

use on the road. The materiality and functionality of digital devices and online realms makes

certain forms of mobile, mediated communication possible, as we have shown in our examples,

but these possibilities are also realized within a culture of backpacking – and in a broader social

milieu – that shapes how travelers perceive and use these technologies. As we have

emphasized, travelers' use of social media and networking technologies is neither inevitable

nor uncontested. In fact, it is often deeply ambivalent. In this sense, exploring the social

affordances of flashpacking reveals less about the technology itself than it does about the

desires and anxieties that travelers attach to being mobile *and* connected. Whether travelers

pack digital devices and travel as flashpackers or not, the nearly ubiquitous spread of

smartphones, portable computers, and social media and networking technologies marks a

transformation in the way people travel and the world in which they travel. The social

affordances of flashpacking that we have outlined here offer a glimpse into the changing world

of backpacking, but they also reflect much broader social shifts in the way we do togetherness

in an increasingly mobile and networked society.

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Table 1. Cited Travel Blogs

Travel Blog url	Blogger(s)	Age	Nationality	Education	Trip Duration
www.followourfootsteps.com	Ashley	Mid 20s	USA	University	14 months
	Greg	28	USA	University	
www.nomadicmatt.com	Matt	Early 20s	USA	Post-Graduate	4+ years
www.theworldeffect.com	Meggan	32	USA	University	1 year
	Beau	Early 30s	USA	University	
ww.ishouldlogoff.com	Jillian	26	USA	University	2 years
	Danny	27	USA	University	
wwww.lostgirlsworld.com	Amanda	28	USA	University	1 year
	Holly	29	USA	University	
	Jennifer	Late 20s	USA	University	

Table 2. Demographics of Research Interviewees

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Nationality	Education	Currently Traveling/ Trip Duration
Chris*	Male	29	USA	University	2+ years
Alan*	Male	25	USA	University	No
Don*	Male	45	UK	Post-Graduate	Less than 1 year
Sara	Female	26	Canada	University	No
Jess	Female	23	Brazil	University	Less than 1 year
Brandon*	Male	33	Australia	University	Less than 1 year
Tara	Female	25	Germany	University	No
Mike	Male	29	USA	University	2+ years
Dennis	Male	Late 40s	USA	Post-Graduate	11 months duration
Briana	Female	Mid 20s	USA	University	1+ years duration
Hugh	Male	Late 20s	USA	University	1+ years duration
Kimberly*	Female	Mid 20s	USA	University	2 years duration
Charles	Male	Early 30s	USA	University	1 year duration
Natalie	Female	Early 30s	USA	University	1 year duration
Edward	Male	Late 20s	USA	University	2 years duration
Catherine*	Female	Late 20s	Canada	Post-Graduate	4+ years
Nathan*	Male	Early 20s	USA	Post-Graduate	3+ years

(cited interviewees are marked with an *)