Google Glass as a technique of self and the revitalisation of the monad

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**Abstract**

In this paper, we use Google’s ‘Project Glass’ - a wearable computing device to be released this year - to feel out what some of the ontological implications of the imminent integration of augmented reality technologies into modern techno-social hybrid societies may be. We seek to bypass the utopian-dystopian dualisms evoked by popular discourse around Glass, to examine how Glass provides another technological technique of self. We build upon the work of Latour et al. (2012) to suggest that Google Glass provides a uniquely interesting case study upon which to test empirically, and hence revitalise, Gabriel Tarde’s concept of the monad as a useful method for tracing and visualising entities in digital networks. We emphasise the importance of considering technologies like Glass not as tools that have an effect on ‘the social’ but rather as just one ingredient in the complex assemblages that mutually shape physical and social landscapes and make up people. We thus avoid simplistic distinctions between the micro vs. the macro (Latour, 1995; Latour et al. 2012) and the online vs. the offline in order to account fully for the mutual interrelation between human and non-human actors in shaping the self and the social.

**Keywords**

**Introduction**

Google Glass is a smartphone-like device that users wear like glasses. Concerns have been raised regarding intrusions of privacy, ethical implications, and safety issues around the integration of wearable computing technology into everyday life. While such concerns may be justified, they are largely epistemological in nature. In this paper we draw attention to the ontological implications of augmented reality technologies by alerting to the affordances technologies like Glass offer to subjects and the social worlds they are assembled in to be made up.

We build on the work of Latour et al. (2012) to suggest that conceptualising Glass as a technique of self revitalises Gabriel Tarde’s ancient and somewhat peculiar concept of ‘monads’. We bypass utopian-dystopian dualisms evoked by popular discourse around Glass in order to examine how Glass is a technological technique of self. Accounting for the use of digital tools as techniques of self through the notion of the monad provides an innovative method for conceptualising their role in modern social landscapes.

**Google Glass as a technique of self**

As mobile computing begins to progress from the smartphone towards wearable, augmented reality technology, some claim we are moving towards even ‘smarter’ technologies. Google’s Project Glass or simply, ‘Glass’, is a smartphone-like device that users wear like glasses and control via voice-commands. Glass is Internet-connected and works as a phone, camera, GPS, and includes social media and other popular smartphone apps. Information is displayed by being superimposed onto the wearer’s normal vision; high-quality audio is transmitted through the skull directly into the eardrums using ‘bone conduction’. As shown
in an early concept video (Google 2012), Glass can project weather forecasts, reminders, traffic information, directions, product information, and video-calls straight into the view of its user.

Glass provides a new way of scaling communication and experiencing day-to-day life. Walking around a local shopping centre with Glass allows the wearer to receive live advertisements that flag what’s on sale, be reminded about a doctor’s appointment later in the day, take a videocall from a friend and share snapshots of their shopping experience with mediated public audiences in temporally and spatially removed locales. These affordances provide ‘offer[s] of subjectivation’ (Latour 2005: 213) – new ways of relating to self and others and the world around that are, quite literally, “in your face”.

Technologies, as well as non-electronic tools, form part of the complex yet mundane practice of assembling self in line with external expectations, influences and rules, and individual desires and aspirations. Navigating day-to-day life involves the use of tools to shape, manage and unfold subjectivity—techniques of self (Foucault 1988). Google Glass is one new utensil that enables users to relate to themselves and others and in this way form understandings of their conduct. Users provide data about themselves to the device and in turn receive information that helps them navigate the social and physical landscapes they inhabit. Without yet knowing exactly what the practical reality of using Google Glass will look like, we may imagine visiting a store while using Glass to call a friend. Glass will remember this concurrence and in the future notify the user about the latest sale on at the shop and the option of notifying the friend
about this sale. The assemblage between technological artefact and human user creates mutual interrelations. Human need and intention shapes technologies and, simultaneously, using technologies influences human conduct. Through this interrelation, practices of subjectivation open up.

We will now turn to exploring how making these affordances and relations the object of sociological study can provide insights into the role of tools and technologies in ‘making up people’ (Hacking 1985; see also Foucault 1988; Michael 2006). boyd suggests that we exist in mediated (2008) or networked publics (2011) that are characterised by the constant presence of invisible audiences, the blurring of public and private, and the collapse of contexts. Increasingly persistent, searchable, replicable, (boyd 2008; 2011) and sharable (Papacharissi and Gibson 2011), the mediated public expands to greater scales, is social and constantly changing, and dependent on users providing flows of information. While the affordances technologies provide are the key ingredient to enabling such a mediated public to advance, these affordances ‘do not dictate participants’ behaviour, but they do configure the environment in a way that shapes participants’ engagement’ (boyd 2011: 39). Thus, users and technologies circulate in mutual interconnections, shaping and re-shaping one another in mutually reflexive ways and carving out new associations. We therefore need to think about digital technologies like Glass by ‘situating technologies [and] technologising situations’ (Michael 2002).

Monads, Actor-Network Theory and emerging digital methods for sociology

Gabriel Tarde’s century-old concept of ‘monads’ has recently been re-interpreted
and developed in ANT to contribute a novel direction for social theory in a networked digital age. Tarde argued for a “pluralist ontology and sociology” (Tonkonoff 2013:1) that challenged the dualist structuralism of contemporaries such as Émile Durkheim. Tarde advocated an alternate approach to sociology that regarded ‘society’ not in terms of ‘ghosts of ideas’ such as micro/macro, agency/structure, subject/object, human/non-human, and so forth (Tarde 2012: 34). Rather, Tarde viewed society and the ‘social’ as a complex, unstable assemblage that emerges out of even more complex entities which, drawing on Leibniz, he termed ‘monads’. Hence, a monad can be conceptualised as an open current, or point, that emerges out of the processes of informational flows at various scales of natural phenomena. Latour provides further insight: ‘... monads are also completely materialist: they are guided by no superior goal, no grand design, no telos. Each of them, much like Richard Dawkins’s genes or Susan Blackmore [sic] memes, fights for its own privately envisioned goal’ (Latour, 2002: 82). Monads spread and assemble through modes of relations that centre on imitation, invention, and opposition (Tonkonoff 2013: 270), or as Deleuze contends through difference and repetition (Deleuze 1994; Alliez 2004). Thus Tarde’s monadology enables an understanding of the ‘social’ not as a fixed feature of the human symbolic order, but as an emergent property of even more complex monadological processes that assemble and re-assemble at various scales of the natural world, ranging from the quantum realm, to the molecular, to genes, human beings, planets, galaxies, the known universe, and everything in between.

Latour et al. (2012) argue that the age of digital networks and the new
availability of digital data sets make it possible to revisit Tarde’s idea of ‘monads’ to dispense with concepts such as individual or society to describe social phenomena. By focussing on the digital traces left behind by actors in a network (human and non-human), Latour et al. (2012: 598) argue that we can ‘slowly learn about what an entity “is” by adding more and more items to its profile’. The radical conclusion is that datasets ‘allow entities to be individualized by the never-ending list of particulars that make them up’ (Latour et al. 2012: 600). Hence, a monad is a ‘point of view, or, more exactly, a type of navigation that composes an entity through other entities’ (Latour et al. 2012: 600). The central argument is that the ‘monadological’ social theory introduced by Tarde was untenable because it was too difficult to test empirically, but that the advent of digital data combined with digital navigation and visualisation now makes this type of social theory credible.

Latour et al. (2012) provide an example of navigating through a dataset to analyse complex collective phenomena by starting at a point, or ‘dot’, in the network and navigating its connections to form a particular view of the whole. This ability to trace individualising profiles of agents through trajectories of data in digital networks without resorting to fixed or mysterious notions such as individuality, agency and structure, is what Latour et al. (2012) refer to as the ‘monadological principle’. In line with the notion established by ANT that explanations of “the social” should depart neither from the agent nor the structure, but rather trace connections between actors, Latour et al. (2012: 601) suggest that digital data offer ways of particularising and visualising the potentially innumerable entities that make up a monad in ways that were not
possible before.

Latour et al. (2012: 593) use the example of looking up an academic on the internet to show how collecting information through various digital searches results in the assemblage of a network that defines an actor. The set of attributes – the network – may now be grasped as an envelope – the actor – that encapsulates its content in one shorthand notation’ (Latour et al. 2012: 593). Taking this idea from Latour et al.’s example of Web 2.0 to our deliberations around Google Glass as a technique of self, we suggest that imminent wearable augmented reality technologies not only offer users new ways of relating to self and others but also open up ways for researchers to account for these relations. However, we are not suggesting that Glass or any other technology is the ‘necessary ingredient’ to render Tarde’s concept of the monad empirically provable. Rather, we seek only to highlight how Glass provides a new means of exploring the configuration of complex networks in hybrid techno-social environments.

**Doing away with dualisms**

Discussion around the implications and affordances of online communication devices in modern society commonly reinforce fabricated differentiations between online and offline, digital and natural, technological and social. Some applaud the ability for new technologies to enhance access to information, communication, and public engagement (Bentivegna 2002; Corner 2007; Jenkins 2006; Rheingold 1993); others foresee the demise of social cohesion and the rise of alienation, anomie and antisocial behaviour (Putnam, 2000; Shapiro and
Leone 1999; Wellman 2000). While some insist on the separateness of technological devices from society – they require manual operation, have interfaces, have on/off buttons, etc. – this modern urge for ‘purification’ (Latour 1993: 11) disregards the hybridity of techno-social life.

Whether for good or ill, technologies develop constantly and reshape the social. As Latour (1991) would have it, technology makes society durable. As wearable computing technologies become more and more embedded into the day-to-day routines of modern subjects, we need to address the complex interconnections between human actors and digital technologies and the ways in which they shape one another. However, we should not account for these via simplistic good/bad, natural/technological, real/simulated dualisms. Rather than keep these spheres sacrosanct, we need more nuanced conceptualisations of how digital tools become enrolled in day-to-day life and the affordances they provide to actors to relate to themselves and others within the assemblages they are associated in.

**Conclusion**

New technologies have often been heralded as agents of change – whether for better or worse. Popular discourse around Google Glass tends to polarise towards utopian and dystopian outcomes—beneficial or detrimental; a privacy nightmare or a society where terrorists can’t hide; a constant connection to friends and family or a world of no escape. Similarly, it gages whether Glass will be adopted widely or fail like other augmented reality devices before it. We bypass such dualisms by exploring some of the ontological implications heralded
by the technological trajectory of mobile computing devices, of which Glass is the most recent and visible. In this we suggest that stringently policing the boundaries between the social and the technological is to ignore the complex intermediation that occurs between the two, and the affordance this interrelation offers for subjects and the hybrid landscapes they populate to be made up (Hacking 1985) and made durable (Latour 1991). Henman (2013: 300) highlights that ‘new and emerging technologies will continue to initiate old questions in new circumstances of what these technologies mean’.

Hence, contingent upon one’s acceptance of the monadological premise, Google Glass (and similar technologies) provides new ways of relating to self and others and enables monads to be traced, created, modified, and maintained across seemingly disconnected and heterogeneous networks with increasing ease, speed and efficiency. The assemblage of human and non-human actors in digitally mediated networks enables monads to be traced beyond the often misleadingly evoked separate domains of the ‘digital’ and the ‘real’. The possibilities of relating to self and other and navigating the complex social landscapes users exist in become visible and traceable if we think about them in terms of the monadological principle. Conceptualising Glass in this way thus revitalises the plausibility of monads in social theory.

Considering technologies like Glass not as tools that have an effect on ‘the social’ but rather as just one ingredient in the complex assemblages that mutually shape physical and social landscapes and make up people accounts for the embeddedness of these tools in social relations. This allows us to realise the
importance of doing away with dualisms and distinctions between the micro and the macro (Latour 1995; Latour et al. 2012) in order to account fully for the mutual interrelation between human and non-human actors in shaping the self and the social. The opportunities digital data and imminent augmented reality technologies like Google Glass offer for the explication and visualisation of monads revitalises Tarde’s previously discounted notion and provides new tools for sociologists to account for the social in the digital age.

References


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