

Affective Elsewheres: Technology and Everyday Talk as Mediators for Human Connection

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New communication technologies have created new spaces for the exchange of feelings and ideas with diverse others. The following essay takes up one such technology, Portals, gold-shipping containers equipped with audio/visual technology connecting people around the globe. Using a participatory rhetorical analysis of Portal's press and participant reflections, participant observation, and interviewing, I argue that new communication technologies such as the Portal create unique affective elsewheres that foster human connection across geographic locations. Further, I argue that the use of everyday conversation is an especially effective form of communication for fostering human connection especially when mediated by new communication technologies.

Keywords: *digital technologies, affect, everyday talk, third places, rhetorical field methods*

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Thank you so much for showing me how alike we all really are despite where we come from. It was a very pleasantly surprising moment when we both discovered our love for ballet and ice cream. Sarah – D.C. Portal Participant

Communication technologies have expanded our ability to connect with others across the globe. We can now video chat with someone in another country, text or instant message, and engage in debate about global issues without leaving our living rooms. Subsequently, communication technologies have expanded our ability to engage persons in and across intercultural contexts; and while issues regarding access to these technologies continue to limit for whom such communication is possible, technology has undoubtedly altered the communication environment.

The expansion of communication networks through digital technologies is one of the primary ways in which the communication environment has changed. Specifically, social networking sites (SNS), blogs, political forums and chat rooms have generated new networks in and across which individuals might interact with others. Despite the pluralization of voices afforded by these technologies, the internet does not necessarily democratize economic, political or social/cultural spheres. Digital technologies network various individuals and groups, however it is narrative and everyday talk across these platforms that make us *feel* connected to others (Papacharissi, 2015).

While digital technologies have broadened the number of persons with whom we might communicate, the conversations we have on/across digital platforms are central to human connection. It is this interplay between technology as a mediator for connection that frames the current study. The goal of this project is to explore the potentiality of these everyday ordinary conversations in building human connection and the spaces in which they occur. Specifically, I

argue that new communication technologies create unique spaces for connection and that ordinary talk is especially effective in bridging human connection when mediated in/through these new technological spaces.

To support these claims, the following essay examines Shared Studios, an organization using technology with the specific purpose of creating human connection. Founded by Amar C. Bakshi, Shared Studios is a multi-disciplinary art, design, and technology collective. Their primary goal is to carve out what they call wormholes in the world, using technology to connect people around the globe and create meaningful dialogue among diverse populations (Shared Studios, n.d.a). Through three major initiatives – Portals, Portal Paths, and Portal Phones – Shared Studios’ mission is to generate human connection across geographic boundaries, carving out spaces of human relation through art and technology.

Shared Studio’s commitment to human connection is, perhaps, demonstrated most clearly in their primary initiative, Portals. The goal of the Portal is to engage people in the everyday lives of persons in different locations. The Portal is a repurposed shipping container, painted gold and equipped with audio-visual technologies. Potential participants can sign up to use the Portal and then enter the shipping container to have a conversation with users who signed up in another country. Each participant is given the prompt: “What would make today a good day for you?” as a means of generating conversation. For 20 minutes, participants can talk to each other about anything they choose. Some have danced with one another, played music together and talked about their pets. The goal is to connect people who would not otherwise interact. There are 25 Portals, housed in diverse locations including universities, refugee camps and public squares online in 13 countries. As of 2016, over 13,000 people have connected through the unique space of the shipping container, creating spaces that raise questions about the role of technology in

generating cross-cultural, human connection by engaging participants in the exchange of everyday talk.

In what follows, the affective gestures of Portal participants' ordinary, phatic utterances are examined to determine the potential of these utterances to create human connection in the unique space of the shipping container. I begin with an overview of theories of affect and technology as they converge around literatures of everyday talk. I do so as a means of understanding how Portals harness technology to engage participants in conversation at the level of the everyday rather than focusing on participants' deeply held beliefs. The potential of the Portals is its embrace of the ontological rather than the epistemological in creating affective, technologically mediated connections. As a result, I attend to how the affective gestures of participant talk demonstrate how everyday vocabulary or phatic utterances create a *feeling* of human connection and the role of the Portal in supporting these affective architectures.

Technology, Affective Elsewheres, and Everyday Talk

The unique *feelings* generated by the shipping container highlight the importance of affect in understanding the potential of everyday talk for human connection within the Portal. While several definitions and approaches to the study of affect have emerged in what has been deemed 'the affective turn,'¹ affects relation to technology and everyday talk is best understood through a Spinozan-Deleuzian notion of affect as emergent (Deleuze, 1988). Deleuze (1988) asserts that if we are "Spinozists we will not define a thing by its form, nor by its organs and its functions" (p. 127), rather as moments of "speed and slowness, momentum and rest" (p. 128). A Deleuzian articulation of affect attends to the emergent intensities between and amongst bodies

¹ For a comprehensive approach to the study of affect see Seigworth & Gregg (2015), "An inventory of shimmers" in *The Affect Theory Reader*

and other bodies, between bodies and things. Prior to the cognitive register of these intensities as emotion, they act as *feelings* that press upon participants as they engage everyday conversation within the technologically mediated space of the Portal.

The conceptualization of affect as emerging intensities is further developed by Massumi (2002) who suggests that the autonomy of affect is its openness – “the degree to which it escapes confinement of a particular body whose vitality, or potential for interaction, it is” (p. 35). This suggests that affect lies in an openness between bodies and between bodies and things. It is an emergent force that shapes the possibilities of interaction (Thrift, 2004). Subsequently, these possibilities emerge in the relations between Portal participants and between participants and Portal technologies. The project’s use of audio-visual technology generates a sort of ‘digital’ co-presence between participants. The space inside the Portal, often narrated as “otherworldly” by participants, press, and Shared Studios themselves, demonstrate the role of affect in creating this sense of co-presence as it accounts for “the medium through which bodies sustain and transform each other” (Woodward & Lea, 2010, p. 157). The Portal operates as a space wherein bodies come into relation, a space wherein participants have the capacity to affect and be affected, a technologically mediated space evoking feelings of human connection.

It is important to note that the Portal is not the only technology with the affective potential for human connection. Social media has been similarly shown to facilitate such feelings (Dean, 2010; Gregg, 2011; Karatzogianni & Kuntsman, 2012; Papacharissi, 2015; van Dijck, 2013). However, because of the ephemeral nature of affect, it is often theorized in terms of structures or architectures “that support it and make it visible” (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 20). While social media platforms might support interactions within and around which affect emerges, Portals provide a unique *physical* structure for the emergence of such affects between

participants and their communication partners as well as between these participants and the technological architecture of the Portal itself.

Affective Elsewhere

The design of the Portals themselves speak to how they might support and make visible affect between participants within and the feelings that might emerge from the conversations they engage. The use of a shipping container evokes a connection to already existing global exchanges of goods. Shipping containers have become ubiquitous representations of global trade, and the representative node of the Portal operates as a sort of ‘distributed aesthetics.’ Balme (2014) outlines a distributed aesthetics as a creative way of experiencing “the spatial and temporal flows of information networks” (p. 176). In addition, each container bears the literal markings of its travels as a means of global commerce, and these markings may psychologically impact participants through a shared sense of sentimentality central to understanding the affective responses between participants and the space within the Portal. The shipping container is a readymade design. It is a relatively inexpensive, uniform space that exists all over the world. This readymade design allows for the reimagining of the shipping container as a place for human interaction. Thus, the containers are already recognized as connecting people (nation-states) across the globe and this gives agency to the Portal as an affective architecture regardless of its placement within a specific geographic area or the participants interacting within.

Each Portal is painted gold which further highlights how it might support the emergence of affect. Shared Studios asserts that the color evokes images of global currency and the exchange of global capital. Portals also state that the color is representative of the sacred. This evocation of the sacred highlights the experience the project expects users to have while

engaging strangers in the Portal, contributes to the affective atmosphere of the Portal itself and the conversations participants might have inside.

The inside of the Portal is also important when unpacking how it supports affective relations and its ability to shape the conversations within. Each Portal is lined in black carpet contributing to participant experience. It is an ambient room free of external distractions. While webcams create a fish-eye effect and limit the visual scope of the user, the Portals are equipped with specially designed cameras to balance out this effect, and the Portal provides a full body view of each of the participants. The dark and limited space of the Portal coupled with the full body, modified camera essentially creates a virtual hologram of each participant. Having participated in a Portal myself, it feels like you're breathing the same air as your interlocutor. The usual performativity is stripped away. The user "functions in terms of being and materiality rather than appearance and mimetic imitation" (Balme, 2014, p.177). This makes the inside of the Portal especially important to understanding the experience of the participants and demonstrates its potential as a *force* that might shape the *forces of encounter* within.

These forces arise in the unique space of the Portal and position it a sort of electronic elsewhere (Papacharissi, 2015). Electronic elsewheres are "social spaces sustained through digitally enabled affective structures that support meaning-making" (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 24). As such, the Portal operates as a *third place*, it is not home or work but a space in-between, an informal meeting space wherein participants can share their concerns. While some scholars have positioned electronic third places as *third spaces*, the actual physical architecture of the Portal makes it more akin to the traditional definition of the third place as a meeting place wherein diverse communities can exchange ideas. While Graham and Wright (2014) articulate these digital meeting spaces as third spaces because they lack the physical location of a third place, the

Portal's unique physical environment is more akin to Oldenburg's (1999) original articulation of a third place outside of work and home where communities gather and wherein political talk has the potential to emerge from everyday conversation. Subsequently, the Portal operates as a sort of electronic elsewhere, a digitally enabled third place that serves as an affective architecture around which participant feelings emerge – an affective elsewhere.

To understand how the Portal operates as an affective elsewhere it is important to engage the feelings experienced by Portal participants. One of the ways the project has attempted to engage these affective connections is through the placement of a Portal at the Zaatari refugee camp in Jordan. The project was used in tandem with the U.N. commissioned virtual reality film, *Clouds Over Sidra*. The film virtually embeds viewers into the Zaatari camp through the eyes of Sidra, a 12-year-old Syrian refugee (Westcott, 2015). Ambassadors then entered the Portal to Zataari to address refugee concerns about the Syrian war and humanitarian crisis. The idea was to use both the film and the affective space of the Portal as an empathy-building channel by harnessing the affective attunements of being face to face with another human being. This technological attempt at empathy building is reminiscent of other means of capturing affect. Sontag (2003) highlights the potentiality and pitfalls of such attempts through an examination of war photography. She asserts that photographs “simplify,” “agitate,” and “create an allusion of consensus” (p. 6). This raises questions about whether new communication technologies can move beyond the simplification of events like the war in Syria to, as Sontag would assert, actually “regard the pain of others” through empathy and affect. When asked what she hoped to get out of the conversation, Dania, a 14-year-old refugee in the Zataari camp said, “I want them to find a solution for the Syrian crisis because we want our country back” (Westcott, 2015, para. 9). One of the creators of *Clouds Over Sidra*, Barry Pousman remarked that entering the Portal

made him feel like he was back in Zataari, and that the use of the Portal could have profound implications on policy. Pousman's comment that the Portal conjured the affective experience of being back in Jordan speaks to the potential of both the Portal and theories of affect in engaging this communication technology. Exiting the Portal after having spoken with children in Zataari, Pousman stated, "That's a ninth-grade girl sitting on the other side of that camera... That is more powerful than every explainer video [about Syria] I've seen on Facebook so far" (Westcott, 2015, para. 17). Bakshi asserts that this 'power' is the result of the intimacy, the affective atmospheres created by the space of the Portal and the 'digital' presence of another human being to whom you must answer at least while in the Portal itself. The Portal between the U.S. and Zaatari brought policy makers 'digitally' face-to-face with those impacted by policy decisions, generating a *force* that potentially altered perceptions through their encounters.

The forces that emerge in participant encounters in the Portal highlight the ways in which new communication technologies have the potential to bridge connection and build community. While digitally mediated third space may not be able to produce communities, they may be effective at producing "feelings of community" (Dean, 2010, p. 22). As such, the Portal can be understood as an affective elsewhere that has the ability to connect diverse communities around shared feelings. The potential of the Portal as an affective elsewhere underscores one of the central questions to the current project:

RQ: *How is the Portal an affective tool for building human connection?*

I now turn my attention to the ways in which these shared feelings seem to emerge within the space of the Portal by engaging literatures of everyday talk. Specifically, I outline the potential of everyday ordinary conversation in bridging human connection when mediated by digital technologies.

Technology and Everyday Talk

Research on digital spaces generally focus on the use of these technologically mediated spaces in the context of the public sphere. As such, “research generally focuses on the rationality, purposefulness, and outcomes of online conversations” (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 26). However, conversation in online spaces is generally fragmented and these exchanges often include personal, everyday talk rather than focused deliberation. Subsequently, much of the research on technologically mediate communication overlooks the importance of this everyday conversation in fostering connection and shaping political discourse (Papacharissi, 2015).

Research on political discourse mediated through digital technologies also tends to ignore the importance of everyday ordinary talk. Much of the research on engagement in the public sphere via digital technologies focuses on political party engagement and/or how activist groups utilize a variety of digital mediums (Graham, Jackson & Wright, 2015b). Countering this approach, Graham et al. (2015b) argue that in order to more fully understand how people engage the public sphere through technology, scholars must analyze their everyday political talk. While Graham et al. focus their own research on the ways in which political talk emerges in non-political digitally mediated conversations, they highlight the utility in engaging the everyday to more fully understand the role and efficacy of this ordinary conversation in shaping political discourse and its potential for influencing public action.

The importance of technologically mediated everyday conversation is that it fosters a supportive, friendly communicative environment (Graham & Wright, 2014). In particular, technologically mediate third spaces/places allow for a presentation of self through the telling of personal information that may lead to connection. This everyday banter acts as a kind of social glue (Basu, 1999), and the exchange of everyday talk via technologically mediated third

spaces/places allows for the emergence of “soft, networked structures of feeling that are affectively felt and lived prior to, or perhaps in lieu of, being ideologically articulated” (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 29). This suggests that everyday talk across digital platforms engage participants at the level of everyday living/being rather than through more formal structures of knowing.

While much of the focus on everyday talk mediated through technology focuses on how this talk generates affects (Papacharissi, 2014; 2015) and may lead to political action (Graham & Wright, 2014; Graham, Jackson & Wright, 2015a; 2015b), the research is especially salient here because it highlights the potential for this digitally mediated affective elsewhere and everyday talk to foster human connection. Further, the research points to the potential of the Portal to alter participants’ perceptions and the role of everyday conversation in creating human connection around everyday interests and shared concerns. This potential leads to the second question guiding the present project:

RQ2: How do Portal participants connect through ordinary, everyday talk?

To answer the current project’s research questions, I provide an overview of the project’s data, research procedures and methods of analysis. In what follows I engage a participatory rhetorical approach to the study of the Portal as an affective elsewhere, and the potential for everyday talk in bridging human connection within the Portal.

Research Methods and Analysis

Engaging Portals as affective elsewheres and the potentials of ordinary talk in bridging human connection requires both qualitative and rhetorical approaches to their study. Recently, there has been an increasing interest in the use of field methods by rhetorical scholars (Dunn, 2016; Endres & Senda Cook, 2011; Hess & Herbig, 2011; McHendry, 2016; McKinnon, Asen,

Chavez & Howard, 2016; Middleton, Hess, Endres & Senda-Cook, 2015; Senda-Cook, 2016). In addition, a focus on rhetorical invention is shifting conversations in qualitative circles as well. As such, this project approaches the study of Portals and the impact of ordinary talk to generate connection by engaging both rhetorical and qualitative methods through the process of a participatory rhetoric.

A participatory rhetorical approach to scholarship is both participant and rhetorically focused. As such, rhetorical analysis is completed on texts produced by participants and participant observation is added to this analysis as a means of broadening the scope of the study and to legitimate rhetorical claims. To achieve these goals scholars generally participate in the production (invention) of rhetorical texts produced by the persons under study, moving the focus of the study beyond participants' experiences to encompass the body of the critic as well.

This shift toward the critic's body is a recognition of what Landau (2016) would call "*feeling rhetorical criticism*" (p. 73, emphasis in original). Rhetoricians are trained to remain detached from the texts under their study, however, some texts (and their associative contexts) warrant an expanded analysis, particularly for their affective qualities. Human connection is an affective experience rooted in the interactions between persons. While the data for this project include interactions recorded following participant experiences in the Portal, understanding the role of everyday talk in bridging connection is something that moves beyond what can be recorded to what is *felt*. Subsequently, analysis of the Portals requires a feeling rhetorical critic.

My own affective response to the Portal is partially what motivated my interest in the project. Landau (2016) suggests that rhetorical criticism often requires the critic to not only move beyond the symbolic, but to "listen to our guts." My first interaction with the Portal created a gut feeling that told me, "something interesting is happening here." While rigorous analysis of

Portal's press, written responses to the Portals by participants, participant and curator interviews, and my own active engagement with the Portal have subsequently shifted the present analysis, what remains is that affective, gut feeling that this project holds potential for human connection. Engaging a participatory approach "is useful for moving away from evaluating symbolism alone, for comparing and contrasting another audience of rhetoric" (Middleton et al., 2015, p. 85), the critic as audience him or herself. As a result, interest in the public affects of human connection generated by the Portal requires embodied field methods that do not dismiss my own affective response.

Research Data and Analysis

The data for this project are 130 single-spaced pages of written responses to the Portal experience captured in Gold Books placed outside of every Portal site. The data span from 2014 -2017 and include Portal responses from conversations between people in New Haven, CT – Tehran, Iran, New York City, NY – Erbil, Iraq, and Washington, D.C – Berlin, Germany. A random sample of data (20% from each year) were selected for coding representing about 50% (63 pages) of the total data. Noting that "something interesting was happening" in the unique space of the Portal and its potential for human connection, I approached the data with the sensitizing concepts of affect (to attune to the embodied, emotional qualities of the Portal), atmosphere (to attend to the unique space of the Portal and the technology used within), and dialogue/connection (to capture those moments in the data that indicated connection between participants). In doing so, the data were approached through an intentional analysis. Intentional analysis attempts to demonstrate how "human experience is embodied, practical, emotional, spatial, social, linguistic, and temporal" (Wertz et al., 2011, p. 127). This process proceeded through first-level, descriptive coding wherein sensitizing concepts were bracketed in an attempt

to remain true to the data. First-level coding was followed by second level, iterative coding wherein the sensitizing concepts of affect, atmosphere and dialogue/connection were engaged in assessing the data. All coding was done in NVivo with the data generating the following codes: ATMOSPHERE, CONNECTION-DISCONNECTION, UNIVERSAL NARRATIVES, CHALLENGING PERCEPTIONS, REAL-UNREAL, and SIMILAR INTERESTS. Coded data were then put into conversation with theories of affect, atmosphere, technology, everyday talk and dialogue.

While the unique atmosphere of the Portal was evident in the data, Davis (1971) encourages qualitative scholars to consider those propositions that emerge from data that are *interesting*. By this, Davis (1971) suggests that scholars be attuned to how the proposition challenges an audience's immediate assumptions and beliefs about a particular phenomenon. While the code ATMOSPHERE is theoretically interesting, it was CONNECTION and its relationship to SHARED INTEREST that produced the most surprising, and subsequently the most interesting codes for analysis. Subsequently, the codes of HUMAN CONNECTION were put into conversation with SHARED INTEREST to explore the ways in which they merged around the everyday, ordinary conversation in the Portal. A visual representation of this data is presented in the essay's appendixⁱ.

After engaging the connections between everyday conversation and the codes HUMAN CONNECTION and SHARED INTERESTS, second level coding proceeded alongside an engagement with literatures on affect and third places/spaces as a means of capturing the theoretically intriguing code of ATMOSPHERE to engage more empirically based claims. Through this coding process, additional codes of BRIDGING, EXPRESSION and AGENCY

emerged and data were re-coded in NVivo to reflect these codes and to support empirical claims about the Portal as a unique space for human connection.

In addition to analysis of Portal Gold Books, rhetorical analysis of media texts, participant observation and interviewing were also employed. Shared Studios' website, as well as press coverage of the project were analyzed through a concept-based criticism (Jasinski, 2001) to explore the ways everyday talk in the Portal is articulated in public discourse. These data add to the project the potential to capture the impact of such technology on public life by attending to how the project has been taken up and circulated. Additionally, following participatory rhetoric's call to place the critic at the site of rhetorical invention, and to engage *the feelings of rhetorical criticism*, over 30 hours of participant observation were conducted, with notes recorded after both volunteering for Shared Studios, participating in Portal connections to Mexico City, Mexico, Nairobi, Kenya, Herat, Afghanistan, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA and speaking with participants after their own experience connecting to these locations. Finally, two informal interviews were conducted with the Milwaukee and Times Square Portal curators respectively. These data were then added to analytic memos, analyzed in relation to existing Gold Book codes, and placed in conversation with rhetorical claims produced from Shared Studio's website and Portals press coverage regarding the everyday, ordinary talk by Portals participants. These data are represented in the essay's appendixⁱⁱ.

Affective Elsewheres and Everyday Talk

Analysis of Portal's data suggest that the Portal is a unique space that acts as an affective elsewhere wherein participants become part of a collective of connection. Further, the Portal demonstrates the potential of everyday talk in fostering this connection across diverse interlocutors. In what follows, I outline how the Portal works to connect participants both within

the communities in which they are placed as well as across geographic locations by providing the affective support for those connections. Further, I highlight how the everyday ordinary conversations in the Portal act as the catalysts for this connection, suggesting the potential for everyday talk in building human connection when mediated by technology.

Affective Elsewheres Inside the Portal

As previously outlined, the unique space of the Portal helps establish it as an affective architecture that works to foster participant *feelings*. However, while physical elements of the Portal may account for some of its ability to operate as support for affect, participant responses and curator interviews further highlight the Portals' potential to act as an affective elsewhere. The Portal works to foster connection between participants who speak inside its technologically mediated walls as well as create connection between and amongst members of the communities in which the Portal is placed.

Papacharissi (2015) suggests that conversations that are supported by affective elsewheres “bridge phatic and paralinguistic conventions of the everyday to afford expression, and possibly, agency claimed affectively” (p. 25). Gold Book data recounting participant responses to the Portal suggest this bridging, expression and affective agency, highlighting how the Portal as an affective elsewhere can act as “a powerful disruption, help accumulate intensity and tension” (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 29) and create human connection.

Bridging. Participants suggest that the experience in the Portal helped affectively bridge their lives with those of their interlocutors. One participant commented, “I would have never expected to be face-to-face with a complete stranger who made me feel as if she knew me.” Another participant noted, “I think it’s really interesting to throw two strangers together, the initial tension seemed to show both of our hopes to create connection and reach mutual

understanding.” Despite the interactions in the Portal being between strangers, one participant highlighted how “most importantly, we laughed from our hearts, because we connected.” Each participant’s response points to the way in which the Portal serves as a unique space for participants to *feel with* their communicative partners. Participants felt as if their partner really knew them, could affectively access their hopes and dreams, and laughed together with their hearts. The Portal serves as a bridge between participants, acting as an affective elsewhere that supports the shared feelings of diverse others. One participant noted their hope for the Portals project and its ability to be an affective bridge by stating, “I hope this project can continue to build bridges between people in other countries.”

Expression. The Portal further operates as an affective elsewhere by allowing participants to express themselves and tell their stories in a space that affectively supports them. One of the ways this occurs is through the Portal’s blending of public and private. Expression also occurs through participants being able to share personal stories as a result of this private yet public setting.

Public spaces are those locales outside of the intimate spaces where people gather to socialize in less regulated ways. Private spaces are marked off from public ones and “privacy is viewed as much as a spatial arrangement as a social one” (Sheller & Urry, 2003, p. 112). The Portals disrupt this distinction by offering a private space for unregulated interaction in the middle of the public space of a city or town. The Portal as a physical object is viewable by anyone who is part of the public in any number of cities that host the project. Despite this, however, the conversations inside the Portal are private interactions not visible to the public. Portals both announce themselves publicly while shielding the conversations within from public scrutiny. They are subject to the regulations and restrictions of the public spaces within which

they operate, but the conversations within are unregulated and completely up to the users. The public/private nature of the affective elsewhere of the Portal creates “the affective character of an experience that renders it fulfilling for individuals” (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 25).

Participants also note the way the affective elsewhere of the Portal supports the sharing of their own lives and stories. “What you are offering to us is to share our stories, conversation and lives across cultures,” commented one participant. “We found pleasure in connecting and sharing our hopes for our countries,” said another. The Portal as an affective elsewhere for expression is perhaps best summed up by a New York City participant after having spoken to a woman in Erbil, Iraq who noted, “it’s so nice to express our feelings across cultures.”

Agency. In the sharing of stories and expressing feelings across cultures, the Portal provides the affective support for participant agency as well. This agency was perhaps most expressed by participants in response to media narratives that shape our understanding of other cultures and geographic locations. The Portal provided the affective support for participants to *feel* the similarities between themselves and their communicative partners, giving agency to both sides of the conversation.

This sense of agency is suggested by a number of participants. One participant recognized the agency of their Afghani partner which is not usually afforded by Western media when he noted, “After hearing so much about Afghanistan in the news, it was refreshing to hear an actual person’s story and to hear that they are optimistic about their country future despite the current conflict.” Another participant also recognized their interlocutor’s agency when they stated, “It was amazing hearing from an actual person. You could never have an experience like this from just hearing about the person in the paper or on TV.” After speaking to a woman in Palestine a D.C. participant said, “The images of people in Palestine we see in the media paints

them in such a biased way...it doesn't help us understand the heart and personality of the people living there." Participants are able to acknowledge the agency of others by *feeling* the experiences of their communicative partners. As such, the Portal serves as an affective elsewhere that provides participants with the opportunity to feel the agency of others.

In addition to recognizing others' agency, the Portal creates the affective support for participants to enact their own agency as well. "I am always bothered at the stereotypes people have about America," stated a U.S. participant. "I was happy to put a face to those misconceptions." After speaking to someone in the U.S., a participant in Iran noted, "This is something we miss when we only watch videos of protests or the Shah. I'm sure she [her Portal partner] would say something similar about the U.S." Another Iranian participant was particularly grateful for the experience as noted by his U.S. partner after leaving the Portal. His partner commented, "We had a fascinating conversation about being gay in Iran. The Portal is great as a space for people to talk about things not usually on the table in some countries." The Portal as simultaneously public and private partially accounts for the sharing of affect around issues not usually "on the table in some countries," and highlight the potential of the Portal as an affective elsewhere. Both are in countries that restrict access to and information from the U.S. Bakshi's Iranian and Cuban partners have not gotten any push back from their governments since installing the Portal, but part of this might be that the conversations within are private. Despite the Portals being visible in the public spaces of Tehran and Havana, the privateness of the conversations within the Portal mean they are shielded from state surveillance. In this way, the Portals provide a unique space for the sharing of private feelings since even the Internet is regulated by the state in both Iran and Cuba.

Participant experiences in the Portal suggest that it supports the sharing of personal, private feelings as an affective elsewhere. Participants feel a bridge between themselves and cultural others, are compelled to express their own feelings, feel a sense of agency not afforded by other third spaces/places, and are able to further feel the agency of others. The space within the Portal provides privacy despite it being in a public space and within this private space, the affective elsewhere of the Portal supports participant feelings.

Affective Elsewheres Outside the Portal

In addition to supporting affects within, the Portal functions as an affective elsewhere supporting the feelings of those in the community in which it is placed as well. Each of the 25 Portals online across the globe have a curator. The curator is responsible for not only facilitating the connections their Portal will make with other Portals in the network but these curators are also responsible for deciding with whom their Portal will connect and for what purposes the Portal will be employed. While each Portal focuses on everyday talk rather than engaging in formal, deliberative discourse, the curator plays an integral role in shaping the possibilities for exchange by determining the purpose/goal of the Portal in their community. Shared Studios co-founder Amar Bakshi insists that curator control is central to the success of the Portal. Rather than bringing a Portal to a community and telling that community how to engage the shipping container, Bakshi provides support for members of that community to use the Portal in ways that they believe will most benefit their own community (A. Bakshi, personal communication, July 14, 2017). Subsequently, curator control is the primary reason why the Portal supports affects both inside and outside its gold painted walls, and further highlights the potential of the Portal as an affective elsewhere.

The potential of the Portal to support the feelings of community members is perhaps most exemplified by the curator of the Milwaukee Portal, Lewis (Zilla). Located in the neighborhood of Amani, the 53206-zip code on Milwaukee's north side, the Portal sits in the center of a neighborhood with the nation's highest rate of incarceration (Toner, 2014). Lewis himself was once incarcerated, a community activist and father, his role as curator is both professional and personal. "I believe curators are the front line in patching up the world," says Zilla. When the opportunity to place the Portal in Amani was presented, Zilla took that opportunity to the front lines of his neighborhood using the Portal to repair relationships between community members, law enforcement and the incarcerated, bridging connections between these groups, providing opportunities for expression, and using the Portal as an affective elsewhere for the enactment of agency.

The enactment of agency was a gradual one, as Zilla noted in an informal interview:

The first people to come and check it out were the youngsters. Lots of folks are scared to come in at first, but the youngsters are curious. Once they had seen it they brought their parents out. Pretty soon all the elders were coming out. Some of them [the elders] rarely left their houses, but eventually they were coming out too. Now it's become a place for the community.

While it took some time to get many community members out to participate in the Portal, Zilla was already a trusted member of the community. This trust helped establish the Portal as an affective elsewhere – a third place – between home and work where the community could gather and talk to one another. It was also an affective elsewhere wherein the community could connect with places other than the neighborhood of Amani.

The Milwaukee Portal has been used to connect the community with other U.S. and international Portal locations. The Portal was used to connect local gang members with gangs in Chicago in an effort to encourage dialogue between rival street gangs. This connection is one of

which Zilla is most proud. He noted that through the Portals rival gangs in Chicago came to an agreement about ways they might work together to reduce gun violence. Additionally, Zilla noted the impact of another connection – between Milwaukee and the Portal in Gaza:

It was interesting for the community to realize they had something in common with the folks in Gaza. In Gaza they are dealing with military [Israeli] violence but their stories are familiar to the violence folks here are dealing with in terms of the police. You feel like you are not alone in this world and you see the hardships that lots of folks are going through in other places and know you are not the only one and that they have been through so much but they overcome it, you know?

The connection between Milwaukee and Gaza created an affective connection around shared feelings of brutality and violence. But the connection was not simply a matter of similarities in experience. The connection served as acknowledgment of mutual fears and, more importantly, it provided participants with a sense that they were not the only ones experiencing such feelings. Despite the geographic and cultural distance between Milwaukee participants and those in Gaza, their feelings were understood, recognized and validated by members outside of their community. Zilla expressed that while community members are aware that “bad stuff” happens in many places around the world, hearing others express the fears and hopes of the community in such a far-away place led to feelings of connectivity – not just with those in Gaza – but with the world.

The Milwaukee – Gaza connection and the impact of the Milwaukee Portal on the Amani neighborhood demonstrates how the Portal acts an affective elsewhere. The Portal provides a space for participants to gather with others in their community as well as those around the globe. This third place fosters connection through affect, a recognition that these feelings are not unique, but shared. Subsequently, the space of the Portal supports and makes visible collective affects both inside and outside of participant communities.

The collective affects shared in the Portal emerge in the everyday ordinary conversations that occur within and around it. Aforementioned, participants entering the Portal are given the prompt, “What would make a good day for you” as a catalyst for conversation. Given that the Portal seems to act as support for the sharing of collective affects, it is important to examine the role of the types of communication within the Portal on generating these shared feelings. As such, I now turn my attention to how everyday ordinary conversation acts as the “social glue” that binds these feelings of human connection together.

Everyday Talk and Human Connection

As demonstrated by the Milwaukee and Gaza Portal participants, the emergence of shared feelings of connection generally follow a recognition of similarity in experience. While the conversations between Milwaukee and Gaza followed the prompt, “What would make a good day for you,” the exchange eventually led to more politically charged and affectively intense communication. This is consistent with other online platforms. Technologically mediated everyday talk serves as an avenue into more deliberative political discourse (Graham & Wright, 2014; Graham, Jackson & Wright, 2015a; 2015b). Further, the use of structured storytelling across social media platforms creates feelings that may lead to what Papacharissi (2015) and others have called connective, rather than collective action. The emergence of affect and the potential of everyday talk have been studied in relation to political participation in the public sphere, however the role of technologically mediated everyday talk in generating feelings of connection has received minimal scholarly attention. Often this connection is assumed, but the Portal provides an opportunity to capture the ways in which this connection occurs. Further, while collective affects across SNS may generate connection, the Portal offers a unique affective elsewhere that heightens the sense of connection as a result of ‘digital’ co-presence.

From Ice Cream to Instant Friendship. Akin to the recognition of shared affect that resulted from similar experiences between Milwaukee Portal participants and their partners in Gaza, participants in the Portal often recount their surprise when discovering they have shared interests with cultural others. What is noteworthy here is that these experiences generally are not as affectively charged as those similarities discovered in the Milwaukee – Gaza Portal. Rather, similarities discovered in the Portal are most often around banal, everyday activities that are a part of participants' everyday lives. Even more interesting is that these shared experiences of everyday living seem to prompt shared affects, leading participants to not only recognize similarities in interests, but a shared humanity. The Portal operates as an affective elsewhere wherein the sharing of the ontological becomes a catalyst for new epistemologies around cultural difference and geographic distance.

The sharing of everyday life as opposed to engaging in more affectively charged conversation is by design. Shared Studios encourages such ordinary talk with the prompt, "What would make a good day for you?" Bakshi asserts that the goal of the Portal is engage people at the level of the everyday and he does not want participants to feel compelled to discuss more complex issues. For Bakshi, the primary goal of the Portal is to use art and technology to get people talking and he believes that conversation is more likely to occur if participants are able to talk about less affectively charged topics and share their own personal stories.

The sharing of the everyday often leads participants to initially feel awkward in the Portal. One participant recounted this initial tension when they stated, "It was a bit weird at first. I was initially nervous to speak to them [participant in Afghanistan] because I kept thinking those people have gone through so much so how can I possibly connect with them?" The participant's initial worry points to the difficulty in starting dialogue when there are expectations

to engage more affectively charged topics. However, they added, “I just started talking about my love of music and discovered that they played guitar. They were so wonderful and funny.”

Another D.C. participant connecting to the Erbil Portal stated, “The last thing the person I met said to me was that she was expecting an awkward encounter, but it ended up being an awesome one because we both have a love for literature.” By starting with an everyday interest, participants were able to discover similarities that stripped away the initial awkwardness and allowed for affective connection to occur.

Participants are often surprised that they share these everyday interests with cultural others. One participant connecting from New York to Nairobi Kenya exclaimed, “He plays video games too!” “It was so nice to connect with someone who also loves ballet as much as I do,” described another participant. A D.C. participant was surprised that their partner in the Iran Portal “loves ice cream too!” The surprise that cultural others enjoy similar activities and foods point to the role of media in shaping perceptions of cultural others. The participant excited about sharing a love of ice cream with their partner in Iran added, “So much of what we see about Iran is the media’s coverage of such a narrow aspect of that country.” Media narratives play a powerful role in shaping our perceptions about other countries and their people, however the sharing of everyday interests humanizes Portal participants in ways these seemingly narrow depictions cannot. A D.C. participant connecting to Gaza further illustrates this potential. “It was a wonderful opportunity to learn about Palestine and the people there. It was such a humanizing experience. The images of people in Palestine we see in the media paints them in such biased ways but now I understand better who lives in Palestine.” Connecting around shared, everyday interests and activities seems to generate a shared understanding and the potential for human

connection – as one participant noted, “it was so nice to connect on an individual level about things that interest us.”

The potential for connection is further demonstrated in participants’ declarations of friendship in the Portal. The New York participant who connected with his Nairobi counterpart over a love of video games explained, “I left feeling like I made a friend on the other side of the globe.” Bonding over a shared love of ice cream, the D.C. participant exclaimed, “Instant friendship!” A participant in the Portal in New Haven Connecticut connecting with Iran said, “A connection formed quickly with just the two of us in the room.” Connecting with a participant in Berlin, another D.C. Portal user suggested a lasting connection after leaving the Portal. “I imagine we will have a lifelong friendship,” he proclaimed. These proclamations of friendship highlight how engaging conversation at the level of the everyday leads participants to a recognition of shared interests that have the potential to not only create an immediate connection, but lasting friendships as well.

From Friendship to Shared Humanity. While participants indicate that they have made a new friend in their Portal partner, these individual connections seem to suggest appreciation and connection with persons outside of the Portal as well. The experience prompts a shared humanity through the emergence of affect. A D.C. participant connecting with Havana, Cuba exemplified this shared humanity when they stated, “I left with the overwhelming feeling that we’re all good, we all want to be better, and that we must give everyone the opportunity to reach their full potential.” This experience helped another D.C. participant to “understand our common humanity” after speaking in the Portal to Iran. A move from individual connection to a shared feeling of the human experience is most exemplified by another D.C. participant after connecting with Erbil in Iraq. They noted, “This was a really amazing experience for me to meet someone

with a very different background than me, yet I found the common humanity in all of us.” The sharing of lived experiences not only creates friendships between individual Portal participants, it generates a shared sense of humanity, altering perceptions about the person and place with whom they spoke and what it means to be human.

This shared sense of humanity emerges as a result of the Portals’ ability to support and make affect visible to participants. As noted by the D.C. to Havana participant above, the experience creates an “overwhelming feeling.” A participant connecting to Iran from New York City expressed that they left the Portal, “feeling understood, feeling cared for, feeling strong and alive.” The affective potential of the Portal is further demonstrated by another New York City to Havana participant who noted that they had an “overwhelming feeling loss” after leaving the Portal because they now understood the “universality of the human experience and the terrible consequences of actions around the world.” The affective potential of these technologically mediated exchanges of everyday life is best summed up by a D.C. participant after speaking to a Syrian refugee in the Berlin Portal. This participant reflexively stated, “I’ll never forget what I saw today. I am changed forever. Thank you for this opportunity to experience the humanity that we need more of in this world. It’s bittersweet – wish we could do more.”

Experiences in the Portal highlight the connective potentials of new communication technologies. These connections provide the Portal with its own mediality, a transmission of meaningful communication across technologically mediated platforms. The Portal’s mediality “invites particular *forms* or *textures* of affective attunement” (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 118 emphasis in original). As an affective elsewhere, the Portal creates a unique space for the sharing of various forms and textures of feeling – sharing that leads to feelings of human connection and a shared sense of humanity. These shared affects emerge from the everyday ordinary

conversations in the Portal, conversations that highlight similar interests and experiences that foster friendship and reveal the potentials of the Portal to create feelings of collective human connection.

Affective Elsewheres and the Potential for Connective Action

The Portal can be considered an affective elsewhere. It operates as a third place, a space between home and work wherein individuals can connect and discuss issues. While many digital platforms have been conceptualized as third spaces because they do not occupy a physical space, the Portal is better conceived as a third place given the importance of the physical structure of the shipping container on its affective potentials. The Portal is a physical, electronically mediated elsewhere that operates affectively. And it is in part this physicality that makes the Portal an affective elsewhere with the potential for human connection.

The space of the Portal itself is important in understanding the conversations within. The Portal blurs distinctions between private and public creating a private space within a public location for communicative exchange. Further, the audio and visual technologies of the Portal provide a sort of ‘digital’ co-presence by placing interlocutors in a virtual face-to-face, body-to-body conversation. This creates an atmosphere that enables the types of connections that occur inside the shipping container.

The Portal being both private and public also provides an affective elsewhere for the free expression of ideas by participants and connection between participants and their communities. This expression emboldens participants with a sense of agency through which they can share their own lived experiences with others from within the shipping container. The agency afforded by the Portal works to bridge the experiences of participants with their communicative partners in the Portal. Additionally, this connection extends beyond the confines of the Portal to the

communities in which the Portal is placed. As demonstrated by the Milwaukee Portal, the placement of the shipping container in various geographic locations can have a profound effect on those communities, bridging connection through the expression of agency outside as well as inside the Portal walls.

The Portal's potential for bridging connection and enacting agency makes it a unique space that supports and makes affect visible. As an affective elsewhere, the Portal supports these shared feelings through the expression of everyday ordinary conversation. This everyday talk reduces the pressure participants feel to connect with diverse others by allowing them the opportunity to share their own lived experiences. The sharing of individual interests and stories subsequently challenge perceptions about intercultural others by dispelling one dimensional media narratives and allowing participants to connect around the often-banal experiences of everyday life. Connecting through these everyday activities makes participants feel as if they have made a friend in their Portal partner. Additionally, this friendship provides participants with feelings of connection to others, leading to a shared sense of humanity. The affective intensities shared between and amongst participants are made visible in the unique space of the Portal as an affective elsewhere.

Participants reflect on these shared affects by suggesting that the experience in the Portal is "deeply moving" and "deeply human." Further, participants have described this affective elsewhere as "very compelling" and "powerful," like "being struck by lightning, deeply human, smart and challenging." As an affective elsewhere, the Portal makes visible shared feelings of humanity and the compelling, smart and challenging potentialities of new communication technologies.

As demonstrated here, the potential of new communication technologies such as the Portal are that they provide a space for the sharing of affect around everyday ordinary life. As such the Portal operates as a space of connection around the ontological rather than requiring participants to engage in rational or deliberative discourse. While this connection around the everyday is one of the strengths of the Portal and other similar technologies such as SNS, it also presents a challenge in terms of what participants will do with this newly acquired sense of connection.

This is perhaps best articulated by a New York City participant after connecting to Honduras:

If we have a chance to have a window into the world we don't know, what do we ask? How do we find the words to express our curiosity and also our humanity – that we love, cry, smile and fight disappointment. Life is actually quite simple, so is conversation. It's what we do with this conversation that matters.

Following this participant, what do we do with the connections made possible through new technologies such as the Portal?

This question points to both the limitations of the current study and to directions for future research. This study only focused on the ways in which the Portal supports and makes visible affect and the ways in which everyday talk fosters human connection. Similar studies have been done focusing on the affective potentials of SNS platforms (Papacharissi, 2015) as well as the potential for everyday conversation to shape political discourse online (Graham & Wright, 2014; Graham, Jackson & Wright, 2015a; 2015b). While this study adds to the existing literature by unpacking how these everyday conversations lead to connection and the power of new communication technologies to act as affective elsewhere to generate a more powerful sense of human connection than their online counterparts, neither previous work, nor the work here have traced what online or Portal participants might do with this newly found sense of connection. Future research should focus on how this shared humanity might influence public

policy or lead to individual political action. As one participant stated after leaving the Portal, “I leave with a new sense of urgency about the issues that affect us all.”

The power of the Portal itself is also rife with possibility for further research. The unique affective elsewhere of the Portal blurs public and private space, shrinks geographic distance and its use of audio/video technologies create a unique experience of digital co-presence. As one participant suggested, “the Portal creates a powerful space for bridging cultural difference.” In light of the potential of the Portal for both human connection and future research, I conclude by urging scholars and practitioners of mediated technologies to follow a D.C. Portal participant in asking, “what are the promises of digital media, in light of a socially-conscious, artistically-minded politics?”

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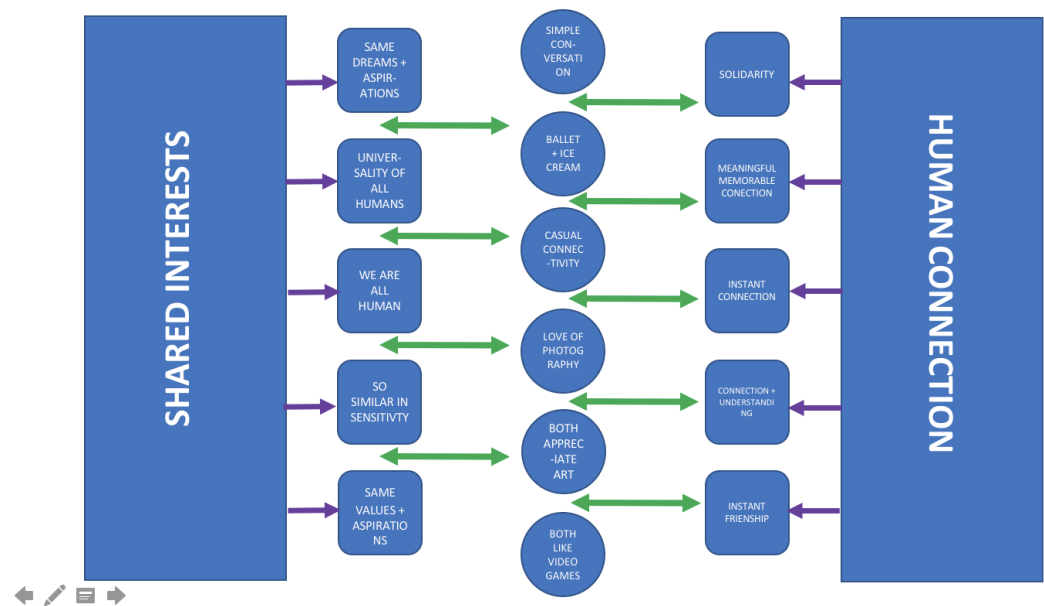
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Appendix

i



ii

Types of Data	Hours Participating/Interviewing/Articles Analyzed
Participant Observation: New Lab – Brooklyn, NY	6 hours
Participant Observation: Times Square – New York, NY	6 hours
Portal Connection: Nairobi, Kenya	30 minutes
Portal Connection: Milwaukee, Wisconsin	30 minutes
Portal Connection: Herat, Afghanistan	30 minutes
Portal Connection: Mexico City, Mexico	30 minutes
Curator Interview/Information, hanging around: Milwaukee Curator (Lewis)	8 hours
Curator Interview/ Information, hanging around: Times Square Curator (Anush)	8 hours
Portals Press Coverage	150 Popular press articles, TV news stories and radio programming