

# **The region as a socio-technical accomplishment of mobile workers.**

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**Abstract:** *Much is made of terms of such as ‘mobility, technology, nomadism’ in social, cultural, area and organisational studies, they are predominantly pursued through rigorous theoretical re-castings of previous definitions. CSCW approaches on the other hand have favoured investigations strongly routed in empirical detail and concerned to elucidate distributed practical activities and their relation to material artefacts, electronic or otherwise. My concern in this chapter, alongside producing an account of interest to a CSCW audience, is to re-cast previous definitions of those terms though in an ethnomethodological manner through learning from a group of people whose everyday, ordinary task it is to mobilise themselves and their setting, to order various devices into a process of work and thereby ‘do nomadism’. So to investigate my topics of interest I have spent six months shadowing a group of people who use their cars as an office. For brevity I have labelled this work-setting the ‘mobile office’. Through doing participant-observations with these travelling workers I have also been able to describe how they accomplish through various socio-material practices certain settings that tend to be treated as pre-existing places by geographers, sociologists, organisational researchers etc. The two places that I will seek to treat as ordinary members’ achievements are: regions and offices. The latter has not been a site of major concern to geographers (which is my disciplinary background) although it certainly is to researchers who study businesses, organisations, labour processes etc. The former has been a key topic for geography, anthropology and to a lesser extent sociology since their outset as professions though it has frequently tended to thin out or ignore entirely other groups of people for whom constructing adequate descriptions of a region is a key task and who may indeed do much of work of bringing about ‘successful’ regions that geographers etc. study post hoc.*

## First part

‘Predictability is an astonishing collective achievement’ (Manning 1992, p4).

If you work in an office. If you go to the same place every day to work. If you do the same hours, Monday to Friday every week. Maybe you see the same faces, pick up your lunch from the same sandwich maker. Drive the same route or take the same train to get there. When you’re at work, you have the same conversations about what you did at the weekend, what you read in the paper that morning or what you saw on tv last night. You fill in the same forms. You answer the phone with the same name. It’s stable, yes. Predictable, yes. Inevitable, no.

There are a lot of ‘if’s about this ‘you’ and they may not hold true for the reader-you. However whichever you, you are, it’s a picture of office life that does not seem that odd. Yet such routines, such orderly interactions really are remarkable. They become all the more remarkable when they are witnessed ordering more unusual places. Predictability in these unusual places is seldom expressed as a complaint and it is much more likely to be understood as an achievement.

In sympathy with the general approach of actor-network theory (Law & Hassard 1999) though more particularly with ethnomethodological studies of work I take predictability to arise not from 'big' casual factors that precede (and might predict) situations of work but to be an everyday, mundane (and yet remarkable) accomplishment of those people and things involved (Garfinkel 1967). When some of the 'bits and pieces' so long associated with 'the office', or rather that are the very stuff of associating the office, are used to assemble the office elsewhere. In this case I would like to describe some of the socio-material practices that allow offices to be achieved on the road. That un-fix or translate an office to make it mobile, diversely connectible and extensible. Offices, like laboratories, factories or law courts, seem to be 'obligatory points of passage' in the circulations of people and things throughout modernity (Latour 1987, Hetherington 1997). They are at the very centre of human affairs by way of building long chains of translations that lead to them and away from them. Indeed, offices, are also 'centres of calculation', to use another Latourian term. As Boden (1994b) puts it, they are places that demonstrate the 'compulsion of proximity', the need for organisations to have rich, unpredictable and intense encounterings to manufacture new orderings. Whether they are made of corridors and small rooms, or open plan, hot-desked or romping places - their spaces are enacted through talking, walking, writing and a variety of other practices.

When we think about all these versions of 'The Office' we might imagine a big immobile building surrounded by other big buildings in a big city, like London, New York or Tokyo. Inside these offices we can observe 'work in action' and begin to fill in the 'missing what' that lies between the codings and summations of interviews and questionnaires administered to office workers and how such workers actually go about 'doing' their tasks (Sacks & Garfinkel 1970, Lynch 1993). We can do ethnographies, blending the practices of the social sciences with those of experts in other fields to produce 'wild' geographies and 'wild' sociologies (Lynch 1993). All too often socio-spatial investigations that claim to be 'ethnographic' proceed through an over-formalised, scientised process of interviewing, transcribing and coding while setting aside the 'under-built' method of participant-observation (or what ethnomethodologists also call 'hanging around with...' and office workers call 'shadowing...'). To clarify this point what do we learn of office work by asking a manager what her job involves? In comparison what do we learn about office work by accompanying a manager as he does his job even just for a few days or more? One 'missing what' may be a corridor walk; in its situated specificities as a manager produces her 'overview' of the 'state of play' of her employees through short sequenced chats, queries, updates, overhearings and overlookings (as observed by Mintzberg 1973, Boden 1994a and Hinchliffe, 1999, on 'overlooking'). This is perhaps an over and oft-stated reminder to social researchers that ethnography's credo is to ask people what, why and how they do what they do *and* to compare that to what they do actually do.

In this chapter I want to describe other offices cobbled together between their big brothers and sisters, de-centred offices, dis-placed offices which have no corridors for managers to do their managing in (Boden 1994a) because these 'lite' offices are travelling along motorway corridors. Via a somewhat strange rhetorical move in the social sciences I would like to deny that 'the mobile office' is part of a *theory* or *explanation* of workplace geographies or that it is an advancement of Theory with a capital 'T'. Instead I will be offering a *description* of how one particular mobile offices is assembled and organised. Not as a case study for Theory to subsume by reductive analysis to yet another demonstration of how good theory is at explaining social and spatial order. Thus I will not be 'stepping back' from the workplace I am interested in, in other words I not taking the 'god's eye view'. I want to show how mobility is organised "on the

ground" by nomadic workers by bringing us, if not quite to the view from the driver's seat, then at least that of the passenger's.

Following Harvey Sack's gloss (see Garfinkel & Wieder 1992, pp186-187) I think I have found 'a perspicuous setting' which provides us through 'the haecceities of some local gang's work affairs, the organisational *thing* that [we] are up against' which is teaching us thereby what we need to know and learn about 'work, mobility, technologies and regions'. So to answer some long-standing geographical questions I joined a work group that faced these 'organisational things' as ordinary problems which can be worked through with and in practical observable describable actions. 'Mobile office' (like laboratory or factory) is a fruitful confusion of topic and resource and a shorthand for a local socio-material ordering of a situated practice which is constituted by highly mobile managers and related service sector workers who do a large part of their jobs in their cars, using mobile phones, 'post-its' and roadmaps and other paraphernalia, whose 'clients' are spatially dispersed. I think you might have a sense then of the 'place' I am going to describe in what follows, though once again I have presented it to you in a kind of shorthand. 'So let's get down to business.'

### Pre-assembled parts

Although much of what follows will be concerned with the *assembling work* done by car-based mobile workers to keep their world relatively predictable, which is also an often unrecognised part of their occupations, many of their resources come *pre-assembled*, and their *stability* is not something to which the workers have to pay much concern, except perhaps as a constraint. This is to say that before any of them wake each morning, the highway system lies waiting, as does the associated signage, highway codes, service stations and so on. Outside their homes, their cars sit parked and ready to start - although this is not always the case since sometimes their cars are broken into, their wheels are stolen or the car engine fails to ignite. The extensive digital and analogue mobile phone networks await their connection - although again this was not always the case since sometimes the handset battery goes dead or the signal strength is too weak for connection. Equally their business organisations remain relatively stable alloys of people and things, with their terms of employment, their multiplicity of contracts, their knowledges and their topologies (Grint 1991; Thrift 1994; Law 1999). We might think of these pre-assembled parts as actor-networks: foldings of what is precarious and stable, far away and close, human and non-human, controllable and treacherous. They are effects at the more durable, predictable end of a socio-material ordering (Law 1994, p139), which usually have limited flexibility, and as such, although we might be able to use a car as an office, we could not suddenly decide to use a petrol station as a fish farm. Flexing the pre-assembled parts into different and unanticipated uses requires work and resources in proportion to their orientation towards, and the fixity of other arrangements.

### Assembling a mobile office

*Sylvia has sometimes as many as three alarm clocks set to make sure she wakes in time to beat the traffic on the highway into the city. So at 5.30 a.m. she quietly makes her way down the stairs, nips in and out of the bathroom, picks up the briefcase that she packed the night before and within ten minutes she is in her*

*car. Every morning when she uses the car for work (she tries to take the train when she can) she goes through the same four actions. Slotting the phone into its hands-free holster. Clipping the facia back on to the car radio and switching it on. Putting her briefcase on to the back seat. And finally taking her shoes off (she likes to drive barefoot).*

These may seem like quite banal ordinary activities, yet these are the *practices* that initiate the day's tasks, and these are the actions that re-assemble her mobile office. They have become routinised and efficient in the hands of Sylvia and the rest of the car-based workforce. They hardly need to be thought about, and yet if they were forgotten Sylvia could arrive at work without her briefcase or with cramps in her feet, she could head off into the *melee* of inner-city traffic without her radio and realise that she had no current information on where the worst jams were and which of the roads in and around the motorway corridor were closed for repairs. Her world would become a little less stable and a little more unpredictable.

Having noted earlier that one of the pre-assembled parts that Sylvia could rely on was her 'business organisation', I think it is worth re-examining such an entity here. A question we might ask is just how we might encounter such a 'big' company (Strathern 1993). Her parent company is listed in the top ten transnational companies in the business directory that I consulted before doing his fieldwork with her. Yet take away the moment of arrival where Sylvia disappears into the lobby of a large building in the centre of London and what have we left? A question about what more specific attachments does she have to the transnational company?

Classic workplace geographies of the kind done on assembly lines or in big offices (Braverman 1974) produced a certain picture of what 'big' and 'powerful' meant and how such organisations succeeded or failed. Where work was, who the workers were and how surpluses were being extracted were relatively clear. Divergent accounts of work from feminisms, ethnomethodologies, cultural studies and more recently from actor-network theories have re-cast organisations less as entities (indeed their very claims to being any kind of causal agent are questioned) and more as processes of extension (Crang 1999; Grint, 1991; Massey 1994; Thrift 1996). It may be worth flagging a concern which is not 'ours' only as critical thinkers but is again an ordinary intelligible worry of Sylvia's: which is worrying over the *extension* and *intrusion* of her work into her 'private life'. Two of the ways this extension and intrusion was occurring was in the longer and later hours of her working day and secondly in and through her being on-call to her organisation and its clients via her mobile phone. This sense of a transnational company not as a big structure but as a loci of actions which are *organising specific connections* which can sometimes be extensions and sometimes be intrusions is all the clearer when someone's workplace is stretched across a region.

Except, it would be a mistake to grant 'a region' some a-priori spatial status, regions consist of concerted efforts, attempts, stretchings, associatings, descriptions and embodyings (Hinchliffe 1999). They are not geographical realities waiting to be stretched across. Bringing about a successful region is after all one of the central tasks and accountable targets of travelling folk like sales reps, regional managers, area managers (as well as geographers). Such a (contingent) accomplishment is not necessarily attributable and is certainly not fruitfully understandable in terms of the stated intentions of each human region maker. In playing down *intentions* and *decisions* socio-material practices can be foregrounded as the activities that co-implicate a set of actors. Region making happens in local association of mundane activities, such as driving from client to client, typing in telephone numbers into car-phones, etc., which are not 'possessed by' nor usually even all that noticeable to those doing them, human or not. Though one of the

activities of making such practices orderly and distributable may be that they are able to be accounted for and recognised in some way and at some stage (Garfinkel 1967). So a story about "life on the road" that a nomadic office worker might tell would be about how they were 'responsible' for the successes of their region because they spent a lot of time out of the office building bonds of loyalty with their clients, getting to know their 'region' by ordinary practices that geographers, anthropologists and sociologists amongst others call 'fieldwork'. They can tell "war stories" (Orr 1996) about their job and display the accumulation of local institutional knowledge gathered on the ground (even while apparently conversing about something else as we shall observe later in the chapter).

To return briefly to workplace geographies, if we accept that one of the modes of ordering which occurs in factory spaces (be they Fordist, Taylorist or Wedgewood) is the 'assembly line' which brings about work through a particular channelling of materials and practices (the factory as a centre of flows) whose humans remain relatively immobile and parts are brought to them to be assembled. Nomadic workers present us with quite a different spatial and socio-technical set of practices; they connect up their regions by constant mobility, assembly lines with moving humans as parts and relatively immobile materials (Law & Hetherington 2000). A further differentiation of workplace geographies comes about through practices here and not necessarily because these workers are categorically defined as separate from factory floor workers.

If we regard the car *as* a mobile office, this helps us to visualise how what we think of as an office can be re-constructed elsewhere, but we do risk making too simple an equivalence between cars and mobile offices. My emphasis, to re-iterate, is on *the assembling practices that associate diverse collections of people and things, and on the assembling of practices that these people and things then allow* (Hinchliffe 1999)

Car-based workers flexibly flit from walking on the pavement to commuting on the train when the car becomes impractical or unnecessary. Sylvia takes the train to London sometimes three times a week and uses public transport. Office practices can migrate from the interior of a car, to the interior of a train, to a city street, to a cafe. Indeed, it is a vital element of what they do that they connect up these diverse scenes. Sylvia has most of her promotional material mailed or e-mailed to her, and has 'hot-desks' so that she can use (immobile) office buildings in Bristol, London and Birmingham. Also, and importantly, her own house serves as a repository for filing cabinets, colour desk-jet printers, pens, floppy disks, spare promotional materials, and so on, which means that she leaves a partially assembled office (and storage facility) for early morning, late evening or weekend, or even weekday periods working at home (yet she is *not* telecommuting).

*In this early to mid-morning slot as the mobile workers head toward their first meeting of the day, speeds are set by a mix of the driver's mode of comportment and the surrounding traffic flow. Sylvia has travelled the M4 hundreds of times and during the early hours of the day travels it at about a hundred miles an hour. Accounting for her speeding, she suggests that the M4 is less heavily regulated by the traffic police because it is a 'business corridor' and the need to keep it flowing smoothly and quickly outweighs the maintenance of the seventy mile an hour speed limit. Her previous diesel-driven car before the current racy "Calibra" wouldn't go much faster than eighty. The week that I am with her in the car is in the Autumn and as we watch the sunrise at about 7 a.m. she starts dealing with her voice-mail. It is at this point that the car merges with the office more significantly. If we think back to a period only a decade or so ago, Sylvia could not have been working like this already. She could have been working in other ways, like planning her day ahead in her head or reflecting back on her experiences of the job so far, but this morning she is already in*

*touch with her clients and her team. There are messages from the night before, and messages from other people on her team who are also on the road and in the office at this early hour. In the morning in the car Sylvia is on-call, and so it is not only delayed messages but phonecalls being received and phone-calls being made. An important part of the work that goes on during this morning period is sorting out what needs to be responded to immediately from what can wait until later. There are socio-material mechanisms for this sorting: voice-mail which, while allowing Sylvia's availability on the phone to be stretched out beyond her immediate ability to answer callers, also allows her to rank the messages she has been left in order of importance. Some may not need to be responded to by phone at all, they may be things she needs to know that day such as a change in company policy, a warning about some problems with their company sales figures. These little tips for the day frequently get noted down along with other messages on tiny yellow post-its that Sylvia sticks to the black airbag mound in the middle of her steering wheel.*

The mobile phone itself gives off the appearance of a sleek self-contained portable object of the late twentieth century, and yet it is a relational entity par excellence constituted by its connection and disconnection to other people and things. It's a truism to say that a disconnected phone is a useless phone, though I would argue that 'connecting' is not as on/off as opposing it to disconnection implies. For Sylvia in the above vignette is combining a form of storage known as voice-mail, accessible through her mobile phone which she is busy translating into return calls, brief notes on post-its, emotional clues for the day ahead and frequently 'requests' to be noted and ignored. And where is her voice-mail? Both distant and part of the local ordering in this and all cases and only distant if we take a naively Euclidean view of Sylvia's workplace (Law & Mol 2000). In initiating the day's tasks Sylvia has delegated to her voice-mail, a perhaps remarkably human action since it phones her up and initiates several conversational turns: firstly telling her that she has messages and then that she can receive them should she choose, and after she has listened to them offering her several other options such as immediate erasure, erasure after 24 hours or archiving. Voice mail allows for the possibility of responsiveness without being drawn into the particular 'concertedness' of phone conversations. Dealing with voice-mail is nevertheless something that is done in 'real time', it does not offer Sylvia or any other user time out of time. She can use it to 'flick' through her messages. Doing this 'flicking' still involves working her way through the turns that her voice-mail provider has deemed are 'normal workflow' for an answering service. Sometimes this means that in its step-by-step procedures it slows Sylvia down. For that reason she has deleted the archive option to spare her that additional question since she never bothers to archive her voice-mail.

Voice-mailing is connective since it allows her time-space availability to be extended, as well as dislocational since it orientates her toward distant and non-immediate requests and responses. So the lonely life on the road which used to typify the experience of 'travelling salesmen' (sic) can be partially refigured through the ability to interact with a team of co-workers without being corporeally co-present. It is worth noting that the various turn-storing devices, most significantly voice-mail, are usually still directed towards 'live' conversations rather than ends in themselves.

A constituent feature of work in and of a mobile office is this: with the need to *centralise* and to *intensify* relationships in the ordering that is a large business company, a need normally served by having a large building where teams can interact and create strong bonds of trust, collaborate on tasks and share out knowledge and skill, the activities of the mobile workers who create regional orderings for these companies are constantly *de-centralising* and *dislocating* discourses and materials into the places of their clients. They are perhaps in an ethnomethodological sense remedying client's indexicals for their organisation. In Susan Leigh Star's (1991) terms, they are at work on the 'extraordinarily complex and delicate task' of inhabiting 'many different domains

at once' (p52) creating bonds of trust, collaborating on tasks and doing knowledge work which runs along a border between (at least) two communities of practice (Wenger 1998). To maintain the organisational orderings, called 'teamwork', at a regional scale requires the kind of *non* face-to-face conversational skills that we have looked at above. It requires creating faces/identities for the team through the possibilities offered by telephonic interactions, *without* being able to gaze upon one another, a task that is made more difficult because of the usual dominance of visual cueing and in particular eye contacts. How does someone politely avoid 'eye contact' over the phone and thereby emphasise their disattention, or how do they make direct extended eye contact and thereby emphasise something they are saying? (Such 'moves' in talk are the staples of Harvey Sacks' (1992) investigations of kind of local ordering that is telephone calling.) And just as actual face-to-face interaction with clients and team members requires several performances of faciality - situational propriety, involvement, accessibility, civil inattention, embarrassment (Manning 1992) - so too does the face work over the phone.

When dealing with other team members a great deal of mediated 'face work' is required since it is the office that has been stretched across space to allow for the greater quantity of co-present face-work with clients (Hughes et al. 1999). The situated nature of work means that there are a particular set of geographies of team performance in every setting since, as in the case of Hochschild's (1983) renowned work with airline cabin staff, the clients come into the *team's place*. In their staff quarters and inside the plane, the team know their way around the stage and the props, they have time together to review their past performances, to work-up news ones, to monitor one another in action and to 'closely' co-ordinate 'what to do next?' (Garfinkel 1967). Other service industry investigations have also tended towards team settings into which the clients enter and so the service team has the added advantage of managing the stage on which the interaction will be played out (Goffman 1956; Burton 1994; Crang 1994; Whyte 1948; Ritzer 1996).<sup>1</sup>

*It's still early in the morning when Sylvia nips down into a tight-cornered underground car park. It's nearby to a greasy spoon café where they serve mugs of coffee latte out of a battered old Gaggia. With a mug of tea or coffee comes a round of hot buttered toast. This is the place where Sylvia's crowd from her company take breakfast when they can. True to form a colleague of Sylvias called Jane comes into the café after we've been there for five minutes. They talk about the times they left that morning: Jane caught a 6am flight to make it down in time for a meeting at this end of the country. Normally at this time she would be out on the road somewhere in the north. Today she's flown down to discuss roadshows' which are going to motivate the transnational companies clients. She and Sylvia talk about this and about their worries that the company is about to make them take on a second client group much to the displeasure of their first client group. Jane has been called to London to make sure she takes and makes the 'right impression' about this change in the organisation.*

The vignette above tells a short tale of how a global company is brought together in a local situation, and it is about remedying some of the ills that the transnational company suffers from. Company HQ is only a couple of blocks away from the café and it offer 'hot desks' rather than hot-buttered toast. It seems obvious where it is easier to run through company business in an informal mode (Boden 1992). Jane is one of the TNC's 'distant' employees since the main office

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<sup>1</sup> An exception to this is Murtagh's (2000) description of the interactional troubles in railway carriages, and their solution through the use of gaze.

in the UK is in London and her region is Scotland, Northern England and Northern Ireland. During periods of re-organisation from the 'centre' Jane is called down for training weekends and mid-week meetings a great deal more. Her airplane commuter runs to attend face-to-face meetings are an additional element alongside the weekly video-conferences and the daily phone-calls she makes when she is out on the road crossing her region.

### Boundary work

*As we approached Sylvia's first appointment of the day, Sylvia explained about knowing what was the appropriate time of the day to try to make various kinds of phone contacts. For instance the message she had left in Jane's voice mail a couple of minutes earlier - she knew it would be voice-mail because Jane was always busy at that time. Equally Jane knew to phone Sylvia back at a certain time when she would be on the road again - in other words in her 'office' again and not in a meeting with clients. Other tricks were calling people whom you knew you didn't want to speak to directly at all - so you picked the times that you would get their voice-mail. Because Sylvia's phone displayed known callers' names and numbers while the phone rang, she would in certain cases not pick up at all and let them leave voice mail instead. There were ways apparently that the organisation could check times when voice-mail was left. And for how long it was left, Sylvia added ominously. Also travelling with Sylvia I noticed how long she spent just 'trying to get hold of someone on the phone'. Connecting to her clients on the phone is not a simple operation; it's a long series of hailings that may eventually get a response. Everyone is busy call-screening everyone else. If they don't, then Sylvia wonders what's wrong with their business!*

Call screening is a *finely crafted skill* among mobile office workers. Constantly being on-call to anyone who has your number is one of the dilemmas posed by the mobile phone, and call screening in its various forms is a way of dealing with this dilemma. Being on-call has various repercussions in terms of both surveillance by the organisation and the possibility of being swamped by client calls (the intrusions I noted earlier). One of the characteristics of an immobile office is that its architecture can be used to firm-up multiple boundaries, and thereby assist in workers' time management/availability. Entering the door of the organisation's building means being at work and being witnessed being at work as both a possibility of surveillance and display (Crang 1994). At a different level, being away from the desk at a meeting means that a task can be completed without interruption because it is happening in another space (which is a way of being off-call to other requests for attention). Even in immobile offices, this other space in which one should not be interrupted is often in the same room, with either the phone diverted and/or a 'meeting in progress' sign on the door. Nevertheless, with the different architecture provided by the car as a mobile office, further forms of boundary and demeanour work are required (Tolmie *et al.* 1998). In the case of Sylvia and many of her other colleagues, this was by setting times of day when they would be officially *in*, and this was generally the early morning and early evening. For the rest of the day their time was given over to doing face-to-face service work with their clients. One of Sylvia's colleagues held on to her car-phone (it was cabled into the dashboard so that it could not be moved as a mobile phone out of interior of the car) long after it was superseded by car-kit clip-in, clip-out mobile phones to make materially manifest where the 'front-line' was between her office and her being out of the office; on-call and not on-call.

These timetables were informal and by their informality bonded and bounded team members who would know about when someone would be 'in' or 'out'. Clients (and superiors) were less likely to be aware of Sylvia's 'availability' unless specifically told to call at a certain time and

even then it was not brought to their attention that this was the time-slot they could rely on reaching Sylvia. The informality further served the purposes of filtering who was allowed to draw Sylvia into conversations, since, by using her display to warn her of people she did not want to be called by, she could let them leave voice-mail.

Certain interactional turns are delegated to the mobile phone system in a slightly less flexible way than to a PA or personal receptionist. Thus, various greeting interchanges which allow caller and called to identify themselves are done by the phone, acting as an electronic receptionist which matches a phone number to a name and affords Sylvia a degree of discretion in her 'being on call' since she has an indicator of who is calling before they can be sure that she is available to them. For outgoing calls this means that the numbers stored by Sylvia are 'screened' on an LCD on her mobile as names that she can flick through by pressing one button and then selecting to call these 'names' with another - at which she point she may well be call-screened by another human or nonhuman receptionist.

It is worth noting that this 'memory' function of the mobile phone system, allows it to absorb (simulate/mimic) the material distinction of the paper address book. For incoming calls the caller's name, if it corresponds with a memorised number, is displayed by the phone, which is how the initial caller identification turn ('Hi, it's Sylvia di Maggio') is delegated to the phone system. 'Hi it's Sylvia di Maggio' is an opening sequence worthy of investigation in its own right since a simple 'hi' or 'hello' does different kinds of conversational ordering. We might reasonably guess from 'Hi, it's Sylvia di Maggio' that the called is not on close terms with the caller since he identifies himself with both his first name and surname. Her surname is doing institutional setting for her. This is not something that is restricted to call-screening in a car of course. It is, however, a way in which a region is netted together, since known callers are divided from unknown callers by this technique (Laurier 1999). Knowing who is calling means that Sylvia or any of other called can shape a response conversationally and emotionally before they pick up. Sylvia was particularly expert at launching informal conversations, greeting known callers as 'hon' (honey), asking about something personal and demonstrating that she remembers them as an individual and thereby framing what followed as a more intimate, affective and trusting encounter. These conversational gestures are used with clients to build a sense of the organisation's engagement and knowledge of them. And at the same time with unknown callers, it initiates the phone conversation on a more typical polite level of response (i.e. 'Hello, Sylvia di Maggio speaking'.)

Phonecalls were also used in other ways to distribute and demonstrate organisational and regional knowledges, for instance in trying to define the identity of particular clients, as in the conversation below between Sylvia and Paul. Here, even in this truncated version of their conversation, they devote a great deal of effort to working out who exactly is the new representative of their client at 'the Richmond' department store. Paul had said that the representative's name was 'Vanessa'. A name was not enough, however, and Paul begins a long series of turns at producing a biography of the client to see if he and Sylvia are agreeing on who they are talking about. And the complexity of this activity is suggested by the overlaps and the stops and starts of their turns.

S: Was she by any chance like an assistant store manager at the same time Rachel was?

P: Yes!

S: Then [do know].

+

P: [in Cardiff].

S: Then I do know. [A skinny]

+

P: [Yeah] I thought you would, yeah.

S: A skinny red-hair?

P: Naah::, naah::. Sort of mousy.

S: Yeah:::

P: Yeah.

S: I think I do know her actually. [Talks a good story].

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P: [ I mean, I mean she's in Cardiff], I think she moved to Exeter and then she moved to Glasgow.

S: She talks a good story but I don't know what she does:::

P: Yeah, don't know. [I don't know].

+

S: [Mmhm].

S: Ahem 'cause she was in Exeter when it changed. It had a massive fashion refit.

P: That's it. Yeah. <sup>2</sup>

After this final 'yeah', Paul shifts on to another topic. What is worth noting is that it remains unclear whether Sylvia does know the same new representative as Paul – she fails on matching hair colour, comes close on 'talks a good story' and seems to have finally shown she knows her with 'Exeter' and 'a fashion refit'. It may also be that they have simply exhausted their interest and also reached an ordinary constraint on how many turns in a conversation can be devoted to making sure of someone's identity. Paul's double 'don't know' on the fourth last line suggesting that he is closing his attempt to describe Vanessa and may be quitting the attempt with an agreement even if their versions of Vanessa still diverge. What we do see in this fairly long

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<sup>2</sup> Underlining is used to indicate emphasis and square brackets with a plus sign on the line between to indicate overlapping talk.

attempt at identifying 'Vanessa' is a kind of question and answer game in reverse, which both Paul and Sylvia show themselves as competent at doing, with knowing when to stop the process being part of their competence. Indeed, showing their competence at doing this may be as important as actually coming to any conclusion about whether they are talking about the same person, as does showing a geographical knowledge of their client (Cardiff, Exeter and Glasgow) and what happens in those different places - Exeter 'changed' and 'had a massive fashion refit.' They are not necessarily pursuing the 'real Vanessa' here, something that becomes apparent if we concentrate on language as action (unfolding, co-ordinating and open-ended) rather than reducing it to language as representation (refers to Vanessa).

### Out of a mobile office

*Sylvia gets out of her car and steps inside a department store. She leaves me the keys to the car. I get out my journal and write some notes about Sylvia getting out of her car and how there's only so much of her job I can be involved in without becoming a nuisance.*

When mobile workers leave their cars they are not only walking into their clients' places to have face-to-face meetings, they are also often joining up with the *materials* of their company which are residing in those places already. For Sylvia this meant that she would be inspecting the operation of her company's store card system *in situ*, and helping to settle it in with their clients. The store card system was not autonomous, and, like a technical maintenance crew for a photocopier, Sylvia and her team were supporting its operation. They performed emotional labours with the staff at the department stores, sharing their disappointments, placating their anger, making their jobs seem 'fun', encouraging them to be interested in sales promotions: in particular the bonus schemes offered by the TNC Credit Provider that they worked for. Aside from these more intangible affective tasks, they would also be reinforcing procedures to do with setting up new accounts on the store card, going over step-by-step instructions and chasing up stores that had lax security arrangements. Their tasks were of course not self-defined, and were done on site because the presence of their system (PDQ machines, application forms, sales forms and promotional material) was necessary. Observing it in context was necessary for them to offer their assistance.

### Broken Parts

*In the middle of the afternoon in the middle of the city Sylvia's car has a flat tyre, but she takes it all in her stride. As she explains, it's not like the time she had to drive to a meeting with her broken windshield pushed out and the rain in her face. Having only ever owned a private car, I sigh and begin thinking about the hassles and dirt of changing the wheel. Meanwhile Sylvia is on the phone summoning the car leasing company's roadside repair staff, after which she sits contemplating for a minute before noticing that across the road there is a hairdressers. She nips over and has a facial while she waits for the repair to be done.*

Much is made in research on social interaction of the importance of 'repair work' which is carried out when social interaction 'goes wrong' (i.e. there are mishearings and

misunderstandings, evidence of abnormal behaviour, etc.). Mobile phone calls frequently require repair work of a technical kind (Goffman 1981) since they rely only on an audible line of connection between participants in an encounter, and that audible line is highly susceptible to interruption and interference. Returning to the 'on-call' problem mentioned earlier, participants in the project all told of how they could exploit these breakdowns in the means of communication at a distance to escape being constantly on-call, or to close a difficult conversation by claiming that the line was 'breaking up'. Or, in the above vignette where Sylvia suffers a mobility breakdown in the form of a genuine flat tyre, she steals some time from the organisation to have a facial. Much of the skill in working on the road is in taking advantage of these spare moments on the wing (De Certeau 1984). Though it should not be forgotten that Sylvia's facial can also be taken to be part of the 'behind the scenes' preparation of self-presentation she has to do in order to meet her clients face-to-face.

*During my fieldwork with Sylvia her passenger side door is broken - it doesn't close properly and produces a deafening low-pitched whistle when she's driving over about 50mph. It makes me wonder about sick building syndrome when your building is your car, with its noise levels, air quality and long seating times. Also the battery in Sylvia's laptop is no longer any use, it charges for about 1 minute and then goes flat, so mostly she just leaves it at home. She has thought about trying to track down an adaptor for a cigarette lighter slot, except her model of car like so many contemporary vehicles no longer caters for smokers and so there's no power source. There might be an adaptor kit but Sylvia knows how long it took her team to get phone kits installed into their vehicles as standard and is unwilling to begin the struggle to have another bit of her office translated into her car. There are too many bits and pieces of people and things involved in adding just that 'small' extra part to her assemblage. There is a long list of other things needing fixing first: her mobile phone displays an error message on its LCD when it is docked into its slot beside the gear stick. Sylvia is unable to work out what it means and it hasn't caused any apparent disruption to her use of the phone so far but she reckons she will need to attend to its warning sometime soon. There is a modem inside her laptop which might not be working because she can't log on to the company server but she doesn't 'know enough about computers' to know whether it's the modem or the software. Most of her weekly figures arrive on paper or by phone anyway and she stills phones in her totals at the end of the week.*

For all the repair work that is constantly going on to keep things moving along together, many of her mobile office's parts are no longer or never were secure bits and pieces. Sylvia boasted that she knew much more about the workings of her mobile-phone than most of her colleagues, while at the same time laughing at her ignorance of where to even check the oil levels in her car engine (though she did know where to put in the water for the windscreen spray). Most of her computer software was a mystery she had no wish to learn about (though again she was very good with spreadsheet packages and Powerpoint). It does not seem to matter that so much of the 'machinery' is broken or under-utilised (by the engineer's definition of it) or its mechanisms incapable of being formalised by its users. In the ongoing flow of conduct the work gets done because it never requires a 'god's eye view' nor an engineer's particular competencies nor a geographer's definition of a region. It requires an 'economical' movement through and of the workplace in all its heterogeneous and site-specific details. If it were so reliant on the reliability of *all* of its parts then this 'actor-network' would never hold together. And if there is something 'new' for actor-network theory to learn from the users of technology then it is perhaps in the many ways the 'finished' projects of engineers, designers, company CEOs, become performed as another reality of that filamental, socio-technical assembly (Mol 1999).

### Summing up a region

It is all too easy in doing research on work and mobility to find oneself missing just what the work *is*, since both the social sciences and 'the management' want to trade in generalities and have the privilege of the *overview*. (Law 2000).<sup>3</sup> An overview which, as Hinchliffe (2000) points out, is reliant on *overlooking* the details, in the sense of both looking from above and, for various reasons, pretending not to notice some of the things one has actually seen. It is also dependent on mobile workers (and social scientists) summing up the regions via the use of, amongst other formalisations: spreadsheets carrying rules for the reporting on and calculation of the 'state of the business' on a day by day, week by week and month by month, client by client, product by product etc. basis. Alongside the documentary work there are also the quick chats, longer meetings, video conferences and work residential weekends where each worker tells "war stories", explains successes and failures and is instructed on 'what the company wants done next'. Whilst the summary view produced by these ways of recording is certainly germane to getting the work of the social sciences *as a profession* done and also that of "the management", it must not be confused with the practical, situated understanding and arrangement necessary for getting one's office to travel nor for designing appropriate artefacts, policy, health care, legal support etc. for mobile workers. Remarks about technologies such as a cars, mobile phones, WAP somehow causing work to be faster, more mobile and more connected-up tend to misrepresent the technologies and their users. Glossing over how their spatio-temporal arrangement in use is just as much about slowing down, holding things in place and dis-connecting.

In the vignettes offered in this article I have attempted to tease out some of the situated techniques used by Sylvia to organise her mobile office each and every day. To remind the reader:

1. Sylvia's getting out of her bed, into her car and the things that are in place already and the things she has to carry with her.
2. Sylvia cruising on the motorway early in the morning *sorting* her voice-mail.
3. *Meeting face-to-face* with a member of her team at a greasy spoon café in the city.
4. Later in the morning, Sylvia making calls to her team (who will be call screening) and her clients (who are likely to be available at that time) to respond, pursue, set dates and times etc.
5. Sylvia and a co-worker talking on the phone, doing identifying whilst also building company knowledge (who is who, where is where etc.)
6. Sylvia leaving the car (her mobile office) to enter her client's place.
7. A flat tyre problem, Sylvia calling for assistance and rescuing the time by having a facial.
8. The various parts of the mobile office system broken or un-used as a good economy.

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<sup>3</sup> Note "the management" are ironically just as likely to find themselves, on the road and dealing with its contingencies as "the workers", and this distinction is being used to highlight why the details of life on the road are ignored. Sylvia, for instance, views herself as part of the management sector of her TNC.

There was a great deal more to office workers' lives on the road than the already complicated, sequentially organised and artful activities of Sylvia that I have described in these vignettes. What the work is varies tremendously and remains to be discovered since the occupations of mobile workers are diverse (from nurses to undertakers to credit sales) as are the regions they are expected to travel around. Passenger seats, where I spent a large quantity of time are reasonably good places to learn about how regions are made and remade and how abstracted and reductive problems of social science (like: global versus local, time-space compression, the predictability of social life, the mapping and bounding of distinct regions) are either relevant, irrelevant or plain nonsense in the specific situations they might otherwise claim to explain.

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