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Complaints about technology as a resource for identity-work

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how people complain about technology. Using discourse analysis, we inspect sixteen hours of video-recorded focus-group interviews and focused one-on-one discussions where technology was topicalized. We investigate these conversations paying attention to (i) features of language and its situated delivery, including emphasis, word choice, metaphor, and categorizations; and (ii) how these accomplish social actions. We show how interactants use narratives of complaint-like activities about hypothetical categories of people and confessions of their own complainable participation to accomplish a 'bemoaning' speech act that manages competing affiliations, demands, and disagreements to construct reasonable moral identities in the situated interaction. By engaging in specific micro-level discursive practices in interaction, participants produce and reproduce what new technologies 'mean' to them and for contemporary society. This shows how important it is to examine opinions as situated actions rather than as simple facts about what people believe. (Complaints, accounts, stance, technology, discourse analysis, identity)*

INTRODUCTION

Complaining about new technologies is a highly visible genre of public discourse, appearing in popular books, online talk, and across broadcast and digital media. In this article we present an analysis of how complaints about new technologies are handled in face-to-face interaction, and how these complaints are used to present interlocutors as a certain sort of person. We propose that interactants use narratives of complaint-like activities about hypothetical categories of people and confessions of their own complainable participation in new communication technologies to accomplish a 'bemoaning' speech act. This activity draws on a rich range of resources around communication ideologies in technologized contexts to manage competing affiliations, demands, and disagreements with one another, and to construct ordinary 'normal', morally reasonable identities in the situated interaction. By engaging in specific micro-level discursive practices moment-to-moment in interaction, participants produce and reproduce what new technologies 'mean' to them and for

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contemporary society. This shows how important it is to examine opinions as situated actions rather than as simple facts about what people believe, and has implications not just for understanding people's attitudes toward new technologies and how opinions are negotiated and formulated, but also how interpretations of 'opinions' about new technologies must be grounded in the nuances of how people deliver particular opinions to attend to interactional and cultural norms.

ATTITUDES TOWARD NEW COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES

New communication technologies (NCTs), comprising electronic and digital technologies of various sorts, have massively affected people's everyday lives (Herring 2015), and research on NCTs has unsurprisingly exploded in the wake of their impact on society (e.g. Bennett & Segerberg 2011; Hickerson & Kothari 2016). Popular media and public discourse have featured various opinions decrying or valorizing how people use new communication technologies and whether this is detrimental or beneficial to society (e.g. Turkle 2015; see also Ling 2008). Other research examines people's attitudes toward NCTs in their own lives through surveys, questionnaires, and interviews about self-reported beliefs and attitudes, examining psychological motivations, functions of engagement, and how these relate to personality and belonging (e.g. Bargh & McKenna 2004; Gangadharbatla 2008; Akar & Topçu 2011; Ong, Ang, Ho, Lim, Goh, Lee, & Chua 2011; Kennedy, Elgesem, & Miguel 2015; Westerman, Daniel, & Bowman 2016).

Over the past decade there has been an increasing focus on NCTs such as smartphones and mobile devices, and social media platforms such as social networking and online dating sites and apps, as a feature of, and embedded in, social interaction (e.g. Ling, 2004, 2008; Arminen 2005; Haddington & Rauniomaa 2011; Laursen 2012; DiDomenico & Boase 2013; DiDomenico, Raclaw & Robles 2018; Brown, McGregor, & McMillan 2014; Rivière, Licoppe, & Morel 2015; Raclaw, Robles, & DiDomenico 2016). This research shows how opinions about technology are not just about individuals, but are social, cultural, political, and linguistic, with users attaching a variety of positions toward NCTs' expressiveness, utility, and affectivity (Gordon, Al Zidjaly, & Tovares 2017)—not just in the norms they reflect, but also in situated meanings and societal ideologies they construct (Thurlow & Brown 2003; Arminen, Licoppe, & Spagnolli 2016).

People's opinions about technology often draw on different social and cultural assumptions—in terms of factors such as nationality, generation, gender, and so forth—when it comes to evaluating the impact of NCTs on communication in everyday life. Familiar descriptions (positive and negative) revolve around the appropriateness of when to use a mobile phone, how to communicate with people over devices, and how to interact with devices in private or public spaces. NCTs are described as useful, but also interruptive and distracting (Ling 2008). But the talk about NCTs does not necessarily correspond to their actual impact. As Ling

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(2004, 2008) points out, the discourse decries much of new technology as individualizing and socially disruptive, while actual use of NCTs are often highly socially integrated. When people talk about NCTs, they are not 'merely' talking about them in some abstract way to deliver an internal opinion, but formulating them AS opinions for the demands of the local interactional context in which opinion delivery has been made relevant. Rather than seeing opinions or attitudes as a personal belief, then, it might be more illustrative to focus on how these are COMMUNICATED through interaction—in other words, we take a discourse analytic approach that focuses on how participants display, formulate, and describe attitudes and opinions (what might better be called stances) in situ.

Stance refers to how people produce attitudes and opinions in social context; stance is not just about displaying positions toward objects, persons, or phenomena, but also aligns participants in interaction with regard to one another relative to the extent to which that stance is shared or agreed upon across the course of conversations (Du Bois 2007). Thus, stances are a communicative way of talking about ordinary cognitive terms such as 'attitudes' and 'opinions', which otherwise are often assumed to, but do not necessarily, reflect the beliefs of the person sharing it (in a way that can make it difficult to ascribe to a particular speech act category in traditional senses; see Atelsek 1981). Accounts, which are explanatory actions that manage potentially problematic attitudes and attributions (Buttny 1993), offer insights into how people perform stances toward social behavior, and what counts as good/appropriate versus bad/reproachable behavior (Jaffe 2009). Often when people produce stances, where these stances are potentially problematic or not shared, they will be accompanied by (or have demanded of them) some account (Buttny 1993). This shows participants' orientation to how their purported views will be taken; however, as mentioned previously, it would be unempirical to assume such stance assemblies reflect an underlying mental state (Puchta & Potter 2002). Instead, we focus on what actions are accomplished through producing stances in interaction.

As interactants take stances toward their own and others' NCT uses, they also position themselves in relation to ordinary and acceptable, as opposed to problematic and accountable, behavior. Studies comparing possible gender and cultural differences, drawing on qualitative and ethnographic data, have been applied to NCT research (e.g. Ling & Yttri 1999; Jung, Youn, & McClung 2007; Kapidzic & Herring 2014; Pearce & Vitak 2015), whereas more discourse analytic studies of how people use or describe NCTs in naturally occurring interaction have emphasized relational and phatic dimensions of communication as a pragmatic accomplishment (Ling 2004; Wargo 2017; see also Rivière et al. 2015). One aim of this article is to examine what presentation of self or impression management looks like when it is packaged in interactional accounts around NCTs. We examine this through the lens of *identity-work*.

Previous research has shown that opinions about NCTs function to construct identity in various ways. Uses of technological objects, and talk about those

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uses, connect to individual and cultural identities—both in how people identify or categorize their own identities (Gordon et al. 2017) and in how people formulate and assess conduct putatively associated with categories of people (Robles, DiDomenico, & Raclaw 2018). We focus on how stances toward technology accomplish identity-work for participants not just by managing stances toward new technologies, but also managing self-presentation and performing their identities for others. Identity-work is a concept that emphasizes how identity is a discursive, social, and interactional process (hence the 'work' of 'doing' identity; Tracy & Robles 2013; Winkler 2018; see also Antaki & Widdicombe 1998; Benwell & Stokoe 2006). Through constructing positions in relation to others and toward particular ideas, participants participate in impression management and display social identities in the local situation, as it unfolds (Bucholtz & Hall 2005; see also Schiffrin 1996; Burkette 2013). Through describing, referring to, and categorizing selves and others (see Schegloff 2007a; Stokoe 2009), participants align with and against others while agreeing for or against particular stances that may resonate locally and culturally (e.g. Aronsson & Gottzén 2011). In addition to more explicit formulations, participants also do these sorts of identity-constructing stance accretions (Rauniomaa 2003) through features of talk—including face and gesture, markers of politeness and impoliteness, structures and poetics of production, and so on (e.g. Goodwin 2007; Lempert 2008; Perelmutter 2010)—in ways that orient to the challenges they make to the identity or face of their interlocutor (Goffman 1967), or the extent to which their turn might be interactionally dispreferred (Schegloff 2007b).

The primary stance we examine in this article can be described as a shade of 'complaining'. A complaint is an expressive speech act that takes a negative stance, or negatively evaluates or assesses, some person, act, or situation. Negative opinions can include a number of stances displayed; but unlike criticisms or reproaches, negative opinions delivered as complaints are generally defined with regard to nonpresent third parties (people and situations not present in the ongoing interaction), and are often about known persons who have transgressed in some way against the complainant (Drew 1998; Schegloff 2005). There is a degree of responsibility associated with the target of the complaint, such that to complain ABOUT is also to blame FOR something (Laforest 2002). This implies responsibility for making a complaint, and an attribution of responsibility for the complainable.

However, complaints may also be made about more general people and situations that are seen to impinge on one's life, or about the 'state' of the world in some way. This reflects how complaints may not just be about personal slights, but also about larger social norms (Laforest 2002). There are a number of culturally recognizable types of personal and impersonal complaints, including for instance whinging, moaning, griping, kiturim, oplakvane, and so forth (e.g. Katriel 1985; Edwards 2005; Daskal & Kampf 2015; Sotirova 2018). In the delivery of negative opinions, including complaints, there is typically an orientation to the extent to

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which the complaint is likely to be culturally acceptable, or controversial (Strauss 2004). Complaining is also considered a face-threatening act in the politeness literature (Brown & Levinson 1987). For these reasons, complaints are often delivered with delicacy, using presequences, mitigation, and/or accounts to establish (and communicate to the recipient) how the complaint should be received. This is part of how people manage the subjectivity of their assessments: as an assessment activity, complaints implicate the disposition of the speaker (Edwards & Potter 2017). Thus, complaints have implications for how people manage identity in interaction.

We propose that *bemoaning* new technologies in society is a type of complaint that lies between this personal-impersonal, or private-public, spectrum of complaining among US and potentially other speakers: it orients to a contested feature of public life and society at large, but also drills down to specific types of people (such as 'millennials') and known persons whose technological conduct is decried or lamented in some way. Bemoaning is a recognizable way of talking about technology, and therefore a resource that participants can use to do things in conversation. It is acceptable, expected, maybe even entertaining to trade complaints about NCTs, including complaining about how others use them and how they have impacted one's own life. It is notable that across all of our data, no participants engaged in lengthy sequences praising technology, but blaming and decrying technology was pervasive and seemed, prima facie, to be a preferred form of perspective-display (Maynard 1989) in this context of conversation. This aligns with research on moralistic and complaint stories in interaction (e.g. Günthner 1995, 1997) that shows how these sorts of actions align participants along certain judgments, develop claims and arguments, and accomplish reciprocity.

Because communication and technology involve aspects of interpersonal communication and mass media (Lievrouw 2014), our project attends to the interpersonal dimensions of communication of how people interact face-to-face, and how different media forms are received and interpreted. Furthermore, by examining how participants metacommunicate about their own and others' communication-technological conduct, we catch sight of how ideologies instantiate at a micro-interactional level (analogous to language ideologies, e.g. Shuck 2004). To do this, we examine how people formulate and present stances toward technologies and their affordances in situated interaction, particularly with regard to descriptions of their own and others' behavior.

In dealing with matters of judgment and negotiations of norms, we are also, therefore, dealing with matters of morality (Sterponi 2003). Discursive approaches have examined morality as the intersubjective expectations of any interaction, and as a higher-order evaluation of conduct (Bergmann 1998). Morality is relevant to complaints both because of the potential of assessable identities or evaluations of character (that someone may be seen to complain unfairly, be labeled 'a complainer') and also because it attempts to hold people responsible for objectionable actions (Robles 2015). Thus, the accountability in complaints is

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moral, as orienting to the necessity of accounts shows an orientation to (i) a possible judgment of the complaint itself or the person delivering it as unreasonable, and (ii) the rights and responsibilities interlocutors have when making claims (Maynard 1989), delivering opinions (Edwards & Potter 2017), and offering descriptions with respect to the distribution of knowledge (Stivers, Mondada, & Steensig 2011). In the following section, we explain our methods for carrying this project forward; thereafter we present our analytic findings, showing how participants use complaint-like opinion formulations about others and selves to manage interactional and cultural norms for doing identity-work.

METHODS

NCTs (new communication technologies) are a ready-to-hand resource in social interaction (see Ling & Haddon 2003; Humphreys 2010; Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell 2010; Laurier, Brown, & McGregor 2016) as objects for embodied action as well as objects for topicalization in talk. We use discourse analysis, drawing on interactional sociolinguistic and conversation analytic approaches, to examine complaints about modern technology as they happen in the moment of talk. Discourse analysis is an approach to naturalistic (usually audio or video recorded) data that analyzes how language is used rather than sentence structure or content—in other words, pragmatics (Cameron 2001; Ehrlich & Romaniuk 2014). Resonantly, sociolinguistics is the study of how language is used 'by social actors in social situations' (Bucholtz 2003:398) and includes work in interactional sociolinguistics and sociocultural linguistics (see for example Gumperz 1982; Bucholtz & Hall 2005; Tannen 2006) that focuses on the role of context and culture in conversation. Conversation analysis looks at how naturally occurring talk is sequentially organized to accomplish action (Schegloff 2007b). Specifically, therefore, we investigate how language is used in interviews and conversations about technology, paying attention to (i) features of language and its situated delivery, including word choice, metaphor, and categorizations; and (ii) how these accomplish social actions.

We inspected sixteen hours of videos of focus-group interviews and focused one-on-one discussions where technology was topicalized. The latter were collected by the first author over a period of four years (2008–2012) in two US states by soliciting volunteers in undergraduate classes to record ordinary conversations that were prompted by a short video on technology, and in which participants were encouraged to discuss technology via this prompt. The focus-group interviews were conducted by the second author over a period of three months (2016) in one US state and was part of a larger project investigating the diverse ethics of listening. It included people who identified with the largest communities of difference in the area, including Asian, American Sign Language, First Nation, Latino/a, and LGBTQ communities, as well as people who primarily identified as Caucasian. The focus groups discussed what 'good listening' was within and across communities and included frequent references to the role of technology in everyday life.

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All participants in our combined corpora were briefed on the nature of the research and provided informed consent prior to participating. All of the data were transcribed in simplified Jefferson (1984) style, and from this we gleaned thirty-six excerpts in which complaints were formulated.

BEMOANING TECHNOLOGY AS RESOURCE FOR IDENTITY

In these sections we discuss how participants in focus groups and topic-driven conversations formulate negative stances toward nonpresent third parties around the subject of technology. As shown in Myers (1998), focus groups (and similar topic-driven sorts of data) constitute an important site for capturing activities such as topic shifts, opinion attribution, and accounts for disagreement. We focus on a practice we describe as complaint-like, but as a specific kind of complaining activity around more formalized opinion delivery (as might be expected with this sort of topic-setting and focus-group data) that might be more properly seen as bemoaning. Participants engage in micro-level discursive practices to accomplish bemoaning, including references to nonpresent third parties and categories of person, uses of metaphors and imagined futures, stories about memories, and negative assessments. In the process of accomplishing these activities, and framing their talk as reasonable, participants produce and reproduce what new technologies mean to them, particularly when used 'badly'. As they do so, they also position themselves morally in relation to cultural norms, while managing affiliating with their copresent interlocutors. In the following sections, we briefly outline the structure of these complaints, before illustrating the specific discursive practices involved in constructing complaints, and show how participants do bemoaning new technology as an interactional practice.

The structure of complaints

What do complaints look like? What is the basic structure through which complaints are generally accomplished? In ordinary conversation, complaints are often not delivered 'on record' right away, but are tested out more implicitly before being made explicit; this allows the complainant to check whether the recipient is likely to affiliate with the complaint: complaints prefer (and receive) affiliation in most situations as a prosocial dimension of communication (Schegloff 2005; Maynard & Hudak 2008). In our data, however, an agenda has been set (so to speak) that projects that opinions will be delivered. The genre is one of perspective-display, where trading and comparing opinions is expected (Maynard 1989): one solicits an opinion, the recipient provides an opinion, and then the one who invited the opinion reports their opinion. Therefore, the communicative context is closer to a discussion or debate than to ordinary talk; nonetheless, even in institutional settings, perspective displays in general and complaints in particular prefer

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agreement or affiliation, and the normative expectation seems to hold that disagreements or disaffiliations from complaints will show 'caution' and are marked with hedges and so forth (Maynard 1989; Ruusuvuori 2005; Traverso 2009; Tracy & Robles 2013). We found this to be true across our data. Most complaints were delivered through different sorts of descriptions (Sacks 1992)—including stories, memories, anecdotes, illustrative examples, hypothetical scenarios, imagined situations, and predictions—of 'bad', inappropriate, or otherwise complainable behavior; and most of these were received with affiliative responses (either agreeing with the assessment about behavior, or sympathizing with the person in some less-obviously-agreeing way).

The structural features of talk comprise the sequential skeleton on which complaints are hung: they organize how complaints unfold. It is important to point out how much more complex opinions appear when examined in the context of their situated delivery. It is not clearly the case that people present themselves as 'anti-technology' or 'pro-technology'. Rather, they work to construct their identities as even-handed, reasonable interlocutors who are carefully weighing the pros and cons of a particular debatable issue. The following two sections focus on the complaints themselves and present cases in which complaints are mitigated through accounts and other features, as well as cases in which complaints are produced fairly baldly. These display the range of directness through which participants accounted for their complaints and the extent to which they confessed their own participation in complainable technology use.

Mitigating complaints through accounts

In this section we describe how accounts are embedded in complaints to bemoan new communication technologies (NCTs), while mitigating the possible negative impressions that develop out of this activity. As described earlier, accounts are ways in which people attempt to explain, justify, or excuse behavior (Buttny 1993). In our cases, where complaints might implicate the participants, parties singly or jointly account for the complainable. 'Complaining' can be seen as an antisocial activity, and no one wants to be seen as a 'whiner'. Furthermore, complaints may be open to challenge where the complainant is seen as equally guilty regarding the complainable matter. Therefore, complaints are often presented in careful ways to manage these potential negative-identity attributions (Edwards 2005) and anticipate possible attributions of hypocrisy (see Pino 2018). Nearly all of the complaints in our data were attentive to these dilemmas. It was not always the case that the person delivering the complaint did this work: sometimes, interlocutors would also attempt to downgrade or soften negative opinions. This was not done as 'disagreeing' with the complainant, but often as a form of self-deprecation to affiliate (Lindström & Sorjonen 2013). The following four examples illustrate this in more detail and demonstrate how accounts are used in talk about technology to manage and shape situated identities.

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In the first example, two university students have watched a short video on modern technology that goes through various statistics about the impact of technology on society (for example, how many relationships are started online rather than face-to-face). This part of the conversation takes place several minutes into their discussion and centers on how younger generations are more exposed to technology at a younger age than they were.

(1) I had to beg

1	Laura:	like we like have been brought up with cell phones and
2		since like kids are getting them so early [now]
3	Maggie:	[sooo early]=
4	Laura:	=we don't know anything different we literally that's
5		what we live off=
6	Maggie:	=like I didn't I got a cell phone when I was till I
7		was I didn't get I was 15=
8	Laura:	=yeah I got one when I was 13 I think =
9	Maggie:	=yeah I didn't get one till I was 15 and even at 15 my
10		dad, I had to beg [for it]
11	Laura:	[yeah]
12	Maggie:	you're 15 and my cousins were like 10 and 12=
13	Laura:	=exactly that have it it's like insane and literally
14		they take over our life when I have nothing to do I'm
15		like why not use my cell phone

In excerpt (1), the participants complain about the ubiquity of technology, its seeming necessity, and generational differences. Categorical references (Sacks 1992) are made to "kids" to describe generic groups of people in a younger generation who get cell phones "so early" (line 2); this emphasis on "so" in line 2 is an example of markedness (Tracy & Robles 2013) that suggests it is unusual or inappropriate. It is common across our data that speakers referenced 'kids' or 'younger generation' as a group of people described as more technologically embedded than themselves, while describing 'the older generation' or 'our grandparents' as those less so. What is interesting is that this complaint about young people's inappropriately young encumbrance with a certain device is threaded with self-deprecatory comments in which the participants refer to their own technological embeddedness. Laura seems to identify with (rather than against) the kids who get cell phones "so early", describing her own generation with "we" as having cell phones that they "live off" of (line 5). This is immediately distinguished, however, by a comparatively longer wait to obtain a cell phone (lines 8–12); both speakers collaborate to construct cell phone usage as something that has been normalized at younger and younger ages (lines 12–13). Laura closes the sequence, again however, by returning to the activity of describing her own cell phone use as consistent with the theme of "they take over our life" (lines 14–15).

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In excerpt (1), the complaint about young people's normalized cell phone usage is mitigated by showing it is part of a larger social trend of which the speakers admit they are a part. This allows them to participate in a public lament about 'kids these days' getting cell phones 'so young' and how this contributes to a world where cell phones 'take over our life', while simultaneously pointing out their own complicity in the problem. This delicate dance around problematic cell phone use and its implications for self and society is accomplished by embedding a sort of 'confession' into the complaint. The next example in (2), by different participants in similar data, illustrates a similar refrain.

(2) You feel so lost

1	Megan:	our great grandparents are probably sitting there like what the
2		hell are you guys doing
3		(1.0)
4	Megan:	you guys can function without your cell phones I- I can't
5	Lila:	no=
6	Megan:	=have you ever- your phone has died
7	Lila:	and you feel so lost=
8	Megan:	=you do=
9	Lila:	=so lost and like [scared
10	Megan:	[you don't] have any connection to the real
11		world and you're like- but it's like
12	Lila:	that's so- and then you can't find a payphone if you need to call
13		somebody

In excerpt (2), the participants jointly complain about the trouble with losing access to cell phones. Megan describes past (and hypothetical future) scenarios in which a phone dies (for instance through loss of battery power) and the effect that this has (line 6). Both participants confess to their disorientation (lines 4–9), which suggests they are as attached to their phones (to some extent) as those whom they criticize in other parts of the data. They begin the conversation with a similar generational contrast, but this time invoke a more specific relational category of "grandparents" (lines 1–2). In a way, they present hypothetical complaints about themselves, and once again, acknowledge their complicity in a social phenomenon they have been lambasting. By providing accounts in the form of confessions in their complaints about others, participants are able to accomplish moral identities, and come across as 'honest' and fair in their opinions. In the next excerpt from a focus group of men in their twenties to middle age, the first speaker gives a more lengthy, explicit complaint about a specific category of 'friends', presumably within their generation.

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(3) Not giving you their full attention

1	Aaron:	I mean I can speak for most of my friends. ninety percent of
2		them are always on their phones. if there's a spare five
3		minutes? it's like oh let's uh. oh we're done. you've got two
4		minutes left. but you all have to stay here. everyone.
5		guaranteed. are on their phone. on Facebook. on Instagram. I
6		think I'm definitely guilty of it some of the time. but when
7		you need to pay attention? its super disingenuine if
8		someone's on their phone. even at all. I mean if- if they're
9		doing like on your phone. it's just the fact that they're not
10		giving their full attention.
11	James:	mmhmm?
12	Aaron:	and they still could be listening but just use it that way.
13	James:	we're all Pavlov's dogs. we- we ((heh heh)) (1.0) there's
14		just no getting around it ((heh heh))

In excerpt (3), the use of one's own generation once again suggests a pervasiveness of technology and its ills as a feature of modern society, but the speaker individually distances themselves from the behavior (lines 1–10). The complaints describe both how people use their phone, what they do when they are on it, how often they are on it (lines 2–5), and its effect on interaction (a loss of attention) (lines 9–10). The complainant mitigates the complaint with an account of their own, once again a confession that they are guilty of this behavior (line 6), but only "some of the time". It is another participant who gives a fuller account and downgrades the seriousness of the complaint by suggesting it is more universal and human, comparing attention shifts to technology (and ostensibly away from co-present situations) as being akin to Pavlov's dogs,[1] conditioned to respond to a particular stimulus or in this case notification, such as the chime of a text message (lines 13–14). In this example, participants confess their own technological sins, but also propose they are unavoidable—getting themselves, and those they complain about, off the hook to some extent. This allows them to complain, but to do so 'fairly'. The next excerpt once again shows accounts and mitigations embedded in complaints about technology, particularly orienting to these activities of both confessing about, and describing, technology's inescapability. This example is also from focus groups, and features speakers of mixed ages sharing their experiences with their own and their friends' and families' technology use.

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(4) I'm so guilty

1	Hana:	my daughters. they do skype conference? with my parents? in Japan.
2		and I can tell, if it's on the computer or ipad? they're not
3		listening. they're not paying attention. right. but if they are in
4		Japan in front of grandparents? they do. I think they feel more
5		personal.
6	Jihun:	paying attention
7	Beth:	mmhmm.
8	Hana:	or maybe I don't know. they feel more pressure. ((heh heh))
9		but I notice that it's so hard to keep kids' attention to
10		when the grandparents talking and
11	Jihun:	yeah.
12	Hana:	but to me. I- I think depending on the person through the technology
13		like if- if- if I really want to talk to that person. like I pay
14		even more attention uh on the phone or during the skype conference.
15		Um. but sometimes there's just too much distraction? when we use
16		technology?
17	Beth:	hmm.
18	Hai:	certainly there's a lot of uh distraction with technology. so when
19		uh wh- wh uhh I mean uh when- when I grew up we were so poor. We
20		didn't have tv? we didn't have uh radios. we didn't have even books.
21		we didn't have games. so what could we do I mean the only thing to
22		have fun was talking to people? umm so ya know- of course- you
23		listen better. nowadays you know you listen to somebody and then all
24		of sudden your phone beeps y- you gotta message coming in. you got a
25		phone call. so you wonder well should I take it? should I not answer
26		it? and if you don't wanna answer it ya know you feel kind of bad.
27		if you answer it of course you interrupt the conversation. so.
28	Hana:	do you feel like y'know when you have dinner? or meeting
29		someone. if someone put the cellphone away? do you feel like oh
30		this person is ready to listen to me or like to be committed.
31		to spend time with me. and then and I do the other way to my
32		kids and I'm so guilty about that. like I- I have phone within my
33		reach all the time. ((.hh ah haha))

At the start of this excerpt it is the speaker's daughters, specific people, who represent a younger generation (as well as being developmentally young) who have a hard time paying attention (lines 1–3). Hana acknowledges the usefulness of technology (lines 4–5), but also frames it as a distraction that can intercede even amidst the best of intentions (lines 9–10, 12–16). Hai picks up on this, framing it again as partly generational (by providing reflection on Hai's own past without technology, and its advantages in some ways), but also as unavoidable (lines 18–27). Hai presents a dilemma in which co-present interactants and technologically mediated interactants can occasionally be at odds, suggesting it is impossible to attend to both

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satisfactorily. Hana ends with the confession that Hana keeps the cellphone in reach "all the time" (lines 32–33), showing how participants implicate themselves in the very behaviors they find complainable. Thus, technology is framed as bad in many ways, but also as necessary and entertaining, such that any ordinary human could be 'forgiven' for bad technological behavior. The next excerpt, echoing the activity in Hai's comments above, again frames technological engagement as something that is unavoidable. This is the same data as excerpt (2), featuring two university women (Megan is a few years older than Lila, and is slightly past traditional college age).

(5) The only way to function

1	Lila:	when I was in middle school I told myself if I ever got a cell
2		phone I would never- when texting like first came out you know I
3		would never have to text I would just call people because you know
4		you talk on the phone to your friends and blah blah blah, well now
5		my sister who's six and should not even know what a cell phone-
6		well she should know what a cell phone is but=
7	Megan:	=hyeah=
8	Lila:	=she's asking for a cell phone and she wants- she wants to learn
9		how to text she barely knows how to write a sentence and she wants
10		to text people and while I think that's part of you know the older
11		sister like looking up to your older sister thing? Um you know just
12		little kids are too- I don't know some kids are too young and they
13		already have [all this technology
14	Megan:	[((nodding))] because we're forcing kids to grow
15		up really quickly. the only way to function in our world is to have
16		technology
17	Lila:	m hm

In this excerpt, Lila complains about her sister's inappropriate desire for a cell phone (lines 5–6, 8–11). The specific person 'sister' is linked again to a generational category of 'kids' and associated with being 'too young' for this technology (lines 11–12). Lila agrees with this, but mitigates it as being something that is 'forced' on kids (line 14), and suggests society has created a world in which detaching from technology is impossible (lines 15–16). Across the data, the complaints—describing general categories of people and specific other people as examples of poor technology use—were mitigated by confessing one's own poor technology use, and suggesting that these technological dilemmas and challenges are a very human struggle in which there is no choice but to engage.

A final way in which complaints about technology were mitigated was by attributing technology to individual differences, and providing examples of poor and reasonable uses of technology. This was the least common form of mitigated complaints. This may be because complaining in this way potentially marks the person out as 'a complainer' or opens the person up to similar criticism and

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potential accusations of hypocrisy (since even the attempt at mitigation could be seen as a form of self-praise, which is dispreferred). Excerpt (6) is from the same focus group as excerpt (3).

(6) Disconnected

1	Aaron:	it all depends on the people. I mean like, I'm not very
2		connected like I don't look at like facebook or- those aren't
3		my interests you know. like my phones on but I it's not
4		like- I don't- if I got a text message I wouldn't check it.
5		(.5) um like I don't really care. I'm dating these two girls
6		and one of them like when she comes over she turns her phone
7		off and puts it in her purse and like doesn't pull it
8		out like unless- unless maybe to check, she has a son? so
9		maybe to check just to make sure everything's okay. this
10		other girl I date um is on her phone all the time like no
11		matter what we're doing she's always like on her phone?
12		like we go out somewhere she's Instagramming or ch- whatever
13		chat texting whatever it is, everything and uh I-
14		I really like both of them but the conversation and
15		time I spend with the one that's always on her phone seems so
16		much more empty? um and she's so much more just
17		disconnected as far as being together

In excerpt (6), Aaron contrasts two women he is dating: one who uses cell phones apparently appropriately (minimally, and only when necessary) and another who does not, and what the consequences of that are for the interaction. The complaint is mitigated by an apparent self-deprecation, "I'm not very connected" (lines 1–2), but it is clear from the reference to "disconnected" later that these terms are being used differently. Aaron's lack of connection is implicitly promoted: though he downplays lack of connection as a feature of 'character' (framing connections as hobbies, "those aren't my interests", lines 2–3), the complaints that follow make it clear that the interests described are problematic. When "disconnected'" comes up later (line 17), it is used to describe something negative, not positive. Thus, there is an implicit distinction between being disconnected from technology, or technologically mediated interactions, versus being disconnected from co-present, face-to-face interactions, with one being less complaint-worthy than the other.

In most of our data, participants mitigated complaints about others' technology use with accounts that emphasized their own confessions or guilt about similar use, and orientations to technology as an unavoidable feature of modern life. Even though the communicative context of these interactions was framed as opinionated, nonetheless participants conformed to the expectations of delivering complaints gently, and generally going along with others' complaints, even when not providing

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full agreement. Opinions are not merely individual expressions of private beliefs, but socially oriented constructions that build and reflect ideologies about technology and its role in society. Thus, it was rare for participants to provide strong negative assessments about technology, even though most of what they did was complaining. The next section discusses more explicit complaints that came with little mitigation.

Bald(ish) complaints

In this section we describe rarer cases in which complaints are delivered without accounts. Complaints may require less mitigation for several reasons. For example, if the interlocutors are close (not the case in our data), if potential agreement with the complaint has already been foreshadowed by earlier talk, or if the complaint is of a fairly generic 'everyone thinks this' sort (see Schegloff 1984). The following example (same data as excerpt (1)) seems to be based on prior talk having established that the complaint would be well-received: both participants have already been doing this sort of complaining about the negative aspects of being overly engaged in cellphone usage.

(7) Live off their cell phones

1	Laura:	exactly, or, and it's like literally you don't even need to like,
2		like I was saying before how some of my friends that I know,
3		they literally live off their cell phones-
4	Maggie:	yes
5	Laura:	they don't even live, I feel like they don't even live in the
6		world anymore.
7	Maggie:	no
8	Laura:	cuz they walk, and I tell them 'GET OFF YOUR CELL PHONE' like, you
9		don't even know what going on around you anymore, it's literally
10		all it is is like looking down at your cell phone texting this
11		person, texting this person like, they don't even, you're
12		communicating with someone like words-
13	Maggie:	like people are like, people are like dy- this is extreme but
14		people are like dying cuz they're texting in their cars while
15		driving.
16	Laura:	yeah ((nods))
17	Maggie:	like-
18	Laura:	like is it that important

In excerpt (3), Laura and Maggie come back to the idea of "living off" cell phones, and frame this as fairly straightforwardly problematic (line 3). Laura refers to a specific category of 'friends' (line 2), while Maggie focuses more on people in general, but the categories are conflated. Though there are some small

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linguistic mitigation markers throughout (hedges, qualifiers, such as 'like'), the evaluations are remarkably strong: "they don't even live in the world anymore", "people are dying'", and so on (lines 5–6, 14). The talk is sprinkled with extreme case formulations (Pomerantz 1986) in which exaggerated descriptions of activity are produced, such as "literally" and "all it is" (lines 1, 3, 10). Laura even quotes an imagined reproach she might make directly to her friends to "get off your cell phone", at a markedly higher volume (line 8). In this interaction, neither participant displays doing the behavior they complain about: this moment is all about the venting. These moments recurred throughout our data, but they were rarer, briefer, and almost always followed by mitigation. After all, given the ubiquity of technology, no interlocutor can assume what is complained about is not something the recipient does; nor that the recipient is not assuming she does the same, which would make her a hypocrite. So HOW the complaint is delivered and responded to allows participants to manage how participating in this opinion-giving will make them 'look' to others. One can manage to look pretty good if one can pull off showing they do not participate in reproachable technological behavior, but also that they are sympathetic to the dilemmas of living with modern technology. The final example (same data as excerpts (3) and (6)) is even more direct.

(8) They're not gonna know anything

1	Trevor:	yeah I mean it drives me cr- I- I mean it drives me crazy I
2		absolutely hate being around a group- especially a group of
3		my friends and everyone's always on their phone I mean it-
4		it is actually why I was doing all that research and why I
5		wrote that paper the way I did is it really to me it's
6		like how our society is seeing a change dumbing down.
7		and like how we're gonna see the next generation is
8		extremely good at using technology that's super basic.
9		it's all the technology that's out there right now is super
10		easy to use. it's not complex. so learning all these
11		things- like my sister for instance is always impressed with
12		the kids abilities to () you know apps and all that but
13		it's such a basic technology when they're older they're not
14		gonna know anything.
15	Aaron:	mmhmm.

In excerpt (8), once again "friends" are mentioned as a specific category (line 3), generation and age categories are invoked (lines 7, 12, 13), and extreme case formulations such as "absolutely", "everyone", "super", and "always" appear (lines 2, 3, 8, 11). Trevor's framing of their own emotions is also stronger: "it drives me crazy", "I absolutely hate" (lines 1–2). And the negative assessment is far stronger: it is not merely about distraction, or even not being good at paying attention, but

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actually "dumbing down" (line 6). The complainant constructs a distinction between the type of technology in which younger people are immersed and at which they excel, and older forms of technology, claiming the former is "super basic" (implying the latter is more complex) (lines 8, 13). At the end, the evaluation is that young people may know how to use simple technologies such as "apps", but won't actually "know" anything (lines 13–14). This is delivered with no obvious mitigation, and even the recipients do not disagree, though their receipt of the opinion is fairly neutral: affiliating with the frustration, but not going on record to agree with the stance.

In this analysis, we discussed how participants used complaints in which descriptions of categories of people and their technological behavior were typically mitigated by accounts (including linguistic mitigation, confessions, and orientations to dilemmas), and more rarely given baldly or even upgraded with direction opinions, emotive language, and extreme case formulations. We showed how participants use stories and descriptions of hypothetical and actual categories of people and their technology use, as well as confessions of their own culpability with regard to complainable technology use, to present their identities in a moral way. This gives some insight in how people make sense, moment-to-moment in interaction, of their own and others' technology uses, and what consequences this has for society and human communication. In the next section we reflect on these results.

BEMOANING NEW TECHNOLOGY AS A FORM OF COMPLAINING

A social shaping approach to technology (Williams & Edge 1996), in contrast to a technological determinism view, sees technology use as shaped by social interaction; complementing this view, Gibson's (1977) theory of affordances suggests technology affords and constrains, but does not determine, actual use. In interaction, we catch a glimpse of how people construct opinions about technology. A simple gloss of the content of what participants say would suggest they give undue weight to technology's agency over their own. But by looking more closely at the interaction, we can see that there is more going on. The discourses of technology that are produced in the public cultural realm—in person, in media, and online—are not merely reproduced, but used to negotiate how people present themselves and their views in interaction.

In this analysis we described a type of complaining activity that we propose to call bemoaning.[2] Bemoaning is done as a meso-level complaint about generic activities in which the complainant must manage or account for their own potential participation, and it is a form of moral discourse that metadiscursively describes and assesses communication activity—in this case, certain forms of conduct around new communication technologies. It is a very popular, in some ways socially rewarding, activity. Indeed, among our data, it was far more prevalent than technological optimism, which was rare and delivered implicitly. Instead, participants by

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and large produced negative assessments of technology; but their assessments of technology were only ever partly about the technology itself. In our data, participants used bemoaning about technology to do identity-work, to portray themselves as a certain sort of person: as prudent, adhering to certain values, cautious, thoughtful, and so forth. By contrast, to avoid seeming backward, reactionary, overly conservative, whiny, and so forth, their complaints were mitigated.

By providing accounts and confessing to their own flaws, participants could have their cake, and eat it too, and save some for later: they could (i) complain about others' behavior (accomplishing moral superiority), (ii) present themselves as fair and even-handed in debating a contested social issue (accomplishing good character), and (iii) confess and absolve themselves of their 'only human' sins (accomplishing apparent honesty and integrity in the moment). Technology is a highly relevant and useful resource for doing these things: it is a common topic in public discourse; it is ubiquitous and ready-to-hand as a topic of conversation; and it is less explosive than moral topics such as religion or politics. New communication technologies are not just tools or media for communicating through their use, but (at the very least) also tools and media for communicating ABOUT their use, and for reflecting on what it is we value about communication in society. Contrary to (especially popular) articles that participate in similar modes of decrying the effects of NCTs on (especially young) people, our results show that this complaint activity IS ITSELF an empirical matter to be investigated, and that in fact topicalizing technology is a rich resource for identity-work in interaction.

This research has focused on types of data in which opinion delivery is expected and framed as part of the research data-collection genre, but it resonates with research on how stances are produced in naturally occurring interaction (e.g. Goodwin 2007), including assessments around technological behavior (e.g. Robles et al. 2018). It also illustrates how elicited forms of talk can be examined for what they communicate about society, and also how they communicate that society into being, for the participants. Further research could delve more concretely into cultural context and explore more closely the possible cultural and linguistic differences through which participants construct complaints with regard to cultural acceptability (Strauss 2004) and cultural 'persuadables' (Fitch 2003).

Ways of talking about NCTs have implications not just for understanding people's attitudes toward new technologies and how they are negotiated and formulated, but also shows how our interpretations of 'opinions' about new technologies must be grounded in the subtleties of how and why people deliver particular opinions in certain ways to attend to identity and maintain their desired image. No opinions are purely a report of an individual's own beliefs. Even when opinion-delivery is what people are tasked with doing in certain sorts of data, participants orient to the local interactional context, as well as cultural and moral norms. Rather than seeing this as a dilution of someone's 'real' opinion, examining the social construction of attitude delivery across participants in interactions gives us insight into how nuanced opinions are performed socially to manage impressions.

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NOTES

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[1]Pavlov's dog refers to a conditioning experiment performed by Ivan Pavlov in which the ringing of a bell was associated with subsequent feeding, ultimately resulting in dogs' anticipatory salivation when the bell was rung even before food was present. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Classical_conditioning.

[2]In the ethnography of communication tradition, this might be considered a cultural term for talk (see Carbaugh 1989), but more research of a different sort would be necessary to explore this possibility.

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