

Subject: Feeling bored? Communication technologies among Romanian teenagers

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This post is based on my MA dissertation on boredom and its relation with communication technology, among Romanian teenagers. It is founded mainly on a two months fieldwork I conducted this summer. I worked with 14 – 17 years old teenagers who lived in upper middle class families, residing primarily in central and affluent neighborhoods in Bucharest. I focused on a particular ‘instantiation’ of boredom, which I named the ‘after-school boredom,’ considered as it was individually or collectively experienced by teenagers. Boredom was not necessarily grasped in relation with any particular technology, but I used technology mainly to frame this particular incidence of boredom.

Indeed, there is a tight link between boredom and technology, but not because one follows the other, but because one creates the conditions for the other to emerge. Exploring teenagers’ perpetual balance between these experiences, I examined the two main factors that articulate this subtle relation: the first one is represented by teenagers’ individual and group self-introspection, under specific forms such as self-awareness. This attitude further shaped a certain emerging normativity within teenagers’ peer groups. At the level of experience, teenagers consider everyday boredom especially in relation with the potentiality for excitement offered by the various communities they form. In the second perspective, I explored the social norms and institutions that largely regulated the social self. In this context, the rather unexpected encounter between

boredom, as an individual or group subjectivity, and the appropriation of technology contests the ethical norms drawn upon teenagers by different institutions such as the family or school. Fostered by this twofold permanent interrogation of the self, teenagers actively engage with a permanent process of intensification of their existing social ties. I am suggesting that by appropriating communication technology within the collective accumulated expertise, teenagers dialectically negotiate the terms of their social relations against an ever changing set of ethical self-made norms. Teenagers are able to reproduce their social arrangements especially because while being bored or excited they insist on those normative schemes driven by group expectations. Furthermore, I am arguing that the permanent adjustment of teenagers' social engagement corresponds to their enduring effort to overcome the underlying conflict between boredom and excitement.

Summarizing, periods of boredom are commonly thought (by teenagers, and particularly by their parents and professors) to be filled up by technology, namely by the various forms of exciting opportunities offered by the mobile phone, access to the internet, messaging systems, offline and online gaming, music, or television. Looking at how teenagers use such opportunities, I suggest that the intimate relation between boredom and technology is to be understood dialectically: on the one hand such personal technologies are constantly appreciated by the individuals as objects of desire per se, while on the other hand they represent unproblematic means for the individuals to access specific peer groups they are already engaged with. In other words, the object of desire distinctively shifts between the technological object itself and teenagers' social sphere. This dualism is generating consistent tension in teenagers. In my thesis I argue that they manage to solve this anguish by constantly evaluating it against one particular set of ethical norms negotiated within the group. Teenagers' notion of 'value' is what remains constant throughout their perpetual swing between boredom and excitement.

But what is boredom?

[to be bored is] 'to have nothing to do, to finish all the things you have [to finish] that day and to want to do something and to come with no idea!... You haven't the faintest idea what to do! And there is nobody there to tell you [what to do]...' (Miruna, 16 yo)

or, more existentially:

[Boredom] 'is like some small little worms that come to your feet, like that, and simply don't let you stay in bed... you don't have peace! So you don't have peace and you must do something in that moment: to consume your energy somehow, or at least to enter Mes for example, or to talk to phone, to let your thoughts go in some other direction, not to stay and think: 'God, I'm staying in my room, like between four walls [laughs] and I cannot stand anymore, I cannot stand it!' And I am looking for flies!' (Beata, 16 yo)

I will give a sense of what is actually happening during this kind of boredom, by taking here only one aspect of it: that is the different strategies teenagers use in order to overcome boredom. Most frequently, the afterschool boredom is experienced individually, while teenagers are in their own apartments. Usually it 'settles in' after some rather intense activity, such as practicing sports, finishing homework, or even playing for six hours on the computer. While bored, teenagers complain that 'there is not much to do,' time is 'still,' and especially that 'you simply don't know what to do!' Under those circumstances, recuperation of the activities which are considered

'interesting' turn out to be something strongest desired. The main strategy teenagers use to 'fight boredom' is to promptly engage through various forms of communication with the most trusted friends. Following one of my informants' words, this strategy could be called 'phone a friend!' Indeed, mobile phone is renowned as the most reliable media one can use when bored. This strategy is generally considered the most active engagement with dissipation of boredom. The second, more problematic, strategy consists in a rather 'passive' engagement (in the first place) with a larger audience: the bored (endangered) self publicly announce the fact that he or she is... bored. This announcement is explicitly done by broadcasting this annoying disposition to an extended list of contacts by means of Internet messaging systems, such as Yahoo Messenger or Skype. Such messages could be as simple as: 'I am boooored...', as well as they could stand for a straight invitation to some specific activity: 'I am bored. Who wants to play Counter Strike?' In any case, teenagers could send such messages to several hundreds contacts. By publicly acknowledging they are bored, teenagers participate to a collective game with simple rules: in the first phase, they offer their peers the option to adopt or not the required attitude towards such a rescue mission. In a second phase, both senders and receivers would have one opportunity to engage into conversation: they could subtly choose if they want to respond or not, as well as the intensity of such response. Following that decision, the initiator of the message chooses at his or her leisure the persons and the modality he or she wants to continue the conversation. This method of dissimulated enquiry leads ultimately to a broader selection base for the future conversation. From this perspective, the apparently passive activity to 'stay on' the Messenger hoping that something interesting would happen constitutes in fact a dynamic method of exploration.

All these strategies include issues such as, for instance, differentiated response times (that correspond to the various levels of intimacy between peers), or a common preoccupation for maintaining a certain balance between a too enthusiastic attitude and an aloof one, between constancy and instability, and ultimately between boredom and excitement. Usually determination is to be found outside the self. As one consequence, if the expectation to overcome boredom is not met, the peer group is also in danger. During this entire process, the existing relationship is not questioned. What is questioned is how the peer group still responds to the individual need to overcome boredom.

From this perspective, boredom is perceived by teenagers as a temporary and precarious suspension of their notion of value, considered within their dual relation with the technological object and the various social groups they are part of.

As a consequence, technology constitutes just a means to expand the self through its active exploration of opportunities. Technology is important not because of what it enables people to do (relate, play, entertain), but because of how people do articulate their individual or collective selves through it. Both strategies outlined here, or more generally the way teenagers act (in the world) articulates a certain collective ethical realm, permanently adjusted by the bored or excited individuals against a set of shared values.